ALTERNATIVES IN A WORLD OF CRISIS

GLOBAL WORKING GROUP BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of a collective effort. In fact, it has been written by many contributors from all over the world – women, men, activists, and scholars from very different socio-cultural contexts and political horizons, who give testimony to an even greater scope of social change. Their common concern is to show not only that alternatives do exist, despite the neoliberal mantra of the "end of history", but that many of these alternatives are currently unfolding – even if in many cases they remain invisible to us.

This book brings together a selection of texts portraying transformative processes around the world that are emblematic in that they been able to change their situated social realities in multiple ways, addressing different axes of domination simultaneously, and anticipating forms of social organization that configure alternatives to the commodifying, patriarchal, colonial, and destructive logics of modern capitalism. These processes of course have faced a series of challenges and contradictions, both internally and from the outside, which have resulted in a diversity of landscapes of transformatory achievements in practice. Nevertheless, and maybe precisely *because* of their partial failures, they have all produced a range of insights. In this sense, this book does not intend to romanticize the social struggles it presents. It seeks instead to portray their contexts, conditions, and complex evolution through honest analysis and in solidarity with those affected in order to contribute to the knowledges of social movements, peoples, and collectives that promote emancipatory, multidimensional change.

As Boaventura de Sousa Santos states (2017, p. 239), at the beginning of the 21st century we are left with no convincing model of progressive social transformation. Both *revolution* and *reformism*, the overall concepts that marked two distinct transformative paths toward a better society in the 19th and 20th centuries, have proven insufficient, as have the theoretical and political instruments that nourished them. In this sense, the changing global political context we are currently living in is marked by the end of short-term cycles, such as the cycle of progressive governments in Latin America, but also by the end of a long-term cycle that started centuries ago. Western dominance in the global geopolitical system is being reconfigured, whilst the Nation-State as the principal institution of our societies, associated with the modern capitalist economy, might become outdated.

Our world is facing a multidimensional crisis arising from the very civilizational foundations that capitalist modernity is built on: on its firm belief that science and technology are the privileged means of solving social problems, and accordingly, on the scientific and technological domination of Nature, conceived only as a pool of "natural resources"; on the assumption that well-being depends on the accumulation of material goods; on its framing of humankind according to the ontology of *homo oeconomicus*, an overall rational, profit-maximizing, and individualistic being; on the enshrinement of unlimited economic growth as the axis of social and economic organization; and on the tendency

to commodify all aspects of life. These bases have not only produced a specific set of problems, they also shape the possible solutions that are envisioned, but often only aggravate the status quo – which explains why the current crisis is often characterized as a civilizational crisis. In the following, we will describe some of its features.

CIVILIZATIONAL CRISIS

Firstly, our world is facing an unprecedented level of accelerated *ecological destruction* that is in many ways related to modern capitalist civilization. It includes climate change, the destruction of existing water sources, the degradation of livelihoods, contamination, deforestation, the dramatic reduction of biodiversity, etc. While the future of humankind itself is at risk due to these forms of ecological destruction, extractivism[1] is threatening livelihoods around the world, Nature is being more and more commodified, and global institutions and negotiations are busy promoting technocratic pseudo-solutions to these problems.

As a consequence, ecological problems are increasingly framed as security issues requiring military solutions. Continuous wars, the ecological destruction of livelihoods, and the growing number of natural disasters have generated the most important migration crisis in history – but again, this is an issue that Western societies mainly address by building walls and increasing securitization.

Secondly, *technologization*, *automatization*, and *digitalization* are reshaping the labor market, the organization of our political and cultural systems, our subjectivities, and, actually, most of contemporary human life. Our world is more connected and technologized than ever before, allowing decision-making and communication to take place at higher speeds than ever before. Most technology production takes place under corporate conditions exclusively for profit, and thus produces technologies which we, as user communities, control less and less. Instead of serving practical community needs, new technologies often nourish artificial needs, which are inflated by the media. Artificial intelligence and robotics are replacing humans in more and more areas and dimensions of society, in ways that entrench exploitation and discrimination instead of promoting emancipation. The unprecedented levels of supervision and vigilance are producing a full-spectrum surveillance society according to the interests of governments and corporations.

Another crucial element defining the current context is *the rise of right wing populism and nationalism*, in alliance with a conservative counteroffensive against human rights,

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1   Extractivism is defined, for example, by the *Grupo Permanente de Alternativas al Desarrollo* as the large-scale extraction of raw materials, such as oil and minerals, or industrial agricultural monocultural products intended not for local consumption but for export, which entails many countries' economic integration into and dependency on the capitalist world market.

women's and LGTB rights, indigenous and collective rights, and the rights of Nature in many parts of the world. Over the last years we have witnessed dangerous alliances between sectors of big capital,[2] conservative churches and lobbies, illegal capital, and others that launched campaigns against the peace process in Colombia, or against "gender ideology" in Latin America and Southern Europe. The rise of Duterte in the Philippines, Macri in Argentina, Orban in Hungary, Modi in India, or Trump in the US all reflect this. Clearly, the global conservative right has learned a lot from the progressive movements of the previous decades and has, to a large extent, co-opted their languages and agendas. All this results in a highly aggressive new phase of capitalism with very little respect for rights, democracy, and existing political institutions.

Corporate power and the intense concentration of wealth in the hands of very few people are continuously increasing, creating new state-corporate sovereignties, either in economic corridors and special economic zones, or through increased corporate participation in government. National and international regulation of transnational companies largely continues to benefit free trade and private capital. Alliances between formal and informal, or even illegal, capital forces determine the diverse manifestations of capitalism today. The increasing competition over power has resulted in skyrocketing electoral campaign costs, blurring the thin line between governments, politics, corporate power, lobbies, and economic elites. All of this threatens the quality of democracy, which is – and this is another factor – increasingly conditioned by media groups related to the same economic powers that reinforce dominant ideas: they spread fear, insecurity, and the notion that people have no alternative but to embrace contemporary capitalist society.

The Global South and the Global North are linked to each other through a specific, neocolonial division of Nature and labor. Hegemonic patterns of production, distribution, and consumption, re-enforced by related social imaginaries and subjectivities, determine the outlines of an *imperial mode of living* (Brand & Wissen, 2017) that is deeply embedded in the day-to-day practices of the majorities in the Global North and is increasingly also finding its way into the upper and middle classes of countries in the Global South. This mode of living is imperial insofar as, in its focus on mass consumption, it assumes access to all resources – space, raw materials, cheap labor, and the entire planet's sinks – is unlimited, but only for a small and privileged minority of world society. This mode of living is only possible as long as such unlimited access is secured either by political and legal means, or by force. The severe social and ecological consequences that it generates elsewhere, for example at resource extraction sites, remain

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2   It is true that other companies have supported some progressive agendas, for example on sexual diversity and women's rights. Reacting to Trump's conservative politics, several companies and their CEOs have also demanded more progressive policies.

invisible to the consumer, who only engages in neat, abstract exchanges mediated by money. The imperial mode of living connects the geopolitical North and South insofar as it represents their shared hegemonic ideal of a good and successful life under current capitalist conditions, an ideal closely related to the promise of "catch-up development".

While most existing social security systems are still institutionally organized around formal employment, the globalized competition of location generated by today's transnational production chains mostly creates flexibilized, underpaid, and often unhealthy labor, and contributes to the expansion of forms of work closely resembling slavery. Huge informal and illegal economies are increasingly substituting the framework of social security and labor protection that resulted from a long cycle of struggles in the 20th century. This intensification of the exploitation of labor has led to a care crisis, as the social capacities of reproduction are finite (as are the ecological capacities of regeneration). While care work is still taken for granted, mostly unpaid and mostly performed by women, we see its burden shifted increasingly onto women from the Global South through global care chains, in an updated international division of labor.

WHY *BEYOND DEVELOPMENT*?

Since World War II, the narrative of development has been a very effective instrument in expanding capitalist social and economic relations into the postcolonial world. In the name of development and modernization, a broad variety of *other* modes of being in the world and understanding it have been labeled as poor, backward, and obsolete. Although development discourse appears to be a friendlier version of earlier, colonial "civilizing" pretensions, it nevertheless transformed two thirds of the world's population, who were living embedded in their own cultures and conceptions of dignity, and their own worldviews, into people in need of assistance. The new world map of "developed" and "underdeveloped" countries that emerged when Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was made the universal measure of human well-being turned them from protagonists of their own histories into imitators of the history of others. From then on, their performance was evaluated by international institutions and experts according to the criteria set down by Western capitalist modernity (Esteva, 1996; Escobar, 1995; Esteva, Babones & Babcicky, 2013).

At the same time, across the different phases of capitalist economy that reach into the present, the distinct roles played by the Global South and North within the world economy have ensured that "catching up" was a goal impossible to reach – precisely because the geopolitical role of "underdeveloped" regions is to absorb the externalities generated by the imperial mode of living, and to supply it with fresh resources.

Seeking alternatives *beyond development* therefore means seeking alternatives beyond this very civilization that capitalist modernity has shaped, beyond this civilization so

keenly focused on economic growth, on instrumental and destructive societal relations with Nature, and on a rational, profit-maximizing, and individualistic understanding of humanity that has led us into this crisis. It also means giving space to other forms of understanding dignity beyond the language of human rights, which was shaped in a very specific context after World War II and represents only *one* of the possible languages of dignity, from which the majority of the world's population is excluded in practice (de Sousa Santos, 2017, p. 253); still, without doubt, the framework of human rights needs to be defended against the rise of right-wing populists and their aspirations to rule by means of informal power.

As a response to this situation, this book intends to contribute a number of elements to the urgently needed collective inquiries taking into view new theoretical and political paradigms of social transformation. Its point of departure is that a multidimensional crisis calls for multidimensional responses. Social transformation today should address simultaneously the complex relations between class, race, coloniality, gender, and Nature, as it is precisely their historical entanglements and interdependencies that configure the civilizational bases of the system we face. Although the debates presented here have much in common with a socio-ecological perspective, we believe that it is necessary to highlight gender, race, and coloniality as necessary dimensions of social transformation that are no less significant than relations between classes or society and Nature. Although the term "socio-ecological" does not necessarily exclude these dimensions, it does not explicitly include them either.

A GLOBAL WORKING GROUP

The Brussels office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation established its Global Working Group Beyond Development in 2016. Its first meeting was held in Brussels in January 2016, with a focus on resource extraction and its socio-ecological impacts in different parts of the world. The group set out to outline a context for its debates that would intentionally be *global*, and that as such would seek to address the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000 and Agamben, 2009) that despite the formal dissolution of colonial empires continues to effectively suggest that all solutions to the world's problems have to come from metropolitan countries, as they have for centuries; in this sense, the Working Group attempts to overcome the systematic invisibilization of social processes of transformation, resilience, or innovation that, viewed from the hegemonic metropolitan perspective, take place "elsewhere" and are usually considered irrelevant – either because they do not contribute to capitalist accumulation, or because they emerge from contexts that are considered "underdeveloped" and backward.

Thus, as one of its premises, the Working Group seeks to build a space where the Global North can learn from the South, and vice versa; where scientific knowledge is

considered very valuable, but also recognized as incomplete, and not as the only form of knowledge there is. It opens up a space for listening to other knowledges that emerge from experience, from organization, from social movements or communities, from forms of knowledge often looked down on as "local", "partial", or "not rigorous", while modern Western scientific knowledge claims to be universal and objective, eliding its own limits and particular perspectives. In this sense, the group tries to overcome what de Sousa Santos calls the *epistemology of blindness* that inhibits us from seeing things that could be important because we simply do not have the adequate lenses through which to see them, and to build an *ecology of knowledges*, a plural dialogue between different systems of knowledge and between different epistemologies, without pre-established hierarchies (de Sousa Santos, 2017). As a result, the Group brings together very distinct threads of critical thinking from areas as diverse as ecology, ecofeminism, Marxism, decolonial thinking, social movements, and academic, grassroots and indigenous knowledges.

We believe that responses to the huge challenges of our times can only be found collectively, in the same way as the production of knowledge, and even thinking as such, is the result of communication and exchange with others, and that these acts necessarily must make seeing the *Other* and looking into different "elsewheres" their point of departure. This book is not only a collective effort because it has been written by many and because every text has been commented on by at least two more members from the Working Group, or because our whole Working Group has written the final chapter collectively in order to reflect ongoing debates. It also gives voice to those collectives that fight the very struggles described in the different chapters; it gives voice to people from all over the world by making visible their situated strategies, practices, and motives.

This text is the outcome of the second meeting of this Working Group, which took place in Ecuador, Latin America, from May 11–18, 2017. It opened with a three-day field visit to Nabón County in the southern part of the country. The six case studies that the book comprises have been elaborated on the basis of a common analytic framework based on emblematic experiences in building alternatives. The purpose behind sharing a common framework was to establish the comparative grounds needed to encourage a transversal debate across the Group that would draw on all six processes without blurring their particularities and yet help nurture our collective search for alternatives. The outcome of this debate is presented in the final chapter, which has been written collectively based on the notes taken during the debates in Ecuador.

The case studies assembled here were selected according to two main criteria: they have all generated practices regarding the material and symbolic reproduction of life that are radically alternative to capitalist/modern/Western civilizational patterns, and they have attained a more than local dimension, or served as touchstones for other actors

in their respective regions and contexts. Case studies presented in this book reflect the views of their respective authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group as a whole, or of other participants.

SIX STUDIES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND NORTH

The six processes that were finally compiled comprise four from the Global South and two from metropolitan countries.

In the first chapter, Isaac Osuoka from Nigeria looks into ethnic communities' resistance to oil exploitation in the Niger Delta, which has resonated across the globe, using a broad, critical, and historical approach.

Then, Edgardo Lander from Venezuela analyses fifteen years of Bolivarian Revolution in his country, later also labeled as 21st Century Socialism, that has inspired processes across Latin America and beyond and offers manifold opportunities for learning, in spite of the very critical situation that it has generated under Nicolás Maduro in more recent times.

In chapter three, Miriam Lang and Mabrouka M'barek take us to Ecuador, another Latin American country, where Buen Vivir (an indigenous-based concept of Living Well which contrasts profoundly with capitalist notions of well-being) was constitutionalized in 2008. This case study centers on the rural County of Nabón (the destination of the group's field visit in 2017), where local practices, traditions, and policies have converged against many odds to make this vision a reality in progress.

In chapter four, Neema Pathak Brome portrays a small village in the state of Maharashtra in India, which promotes a self-contained and self-reliant village republic in line with Mahatma Gandhi's vision of *village swaraj*. Mendha Lekha village set out to transform itself profoundly in the first place, in order to then not only inspire many other villages, but also to transform central state policies, legislation and institutions, especially regarding forest management.

Regarding current pathways of transformation in the Global North, the book looks at the two European countries that the recent debt crisis has affected most: Greece and Spain. While Giorgos Velegrakis and Aliki Kosyfologou analyze two examples of urban commons created by social movements in the context of the massive number of migrants that Greece has received in the last years, Mauro Castro describes how the Indignados rebellion in Spain has given rise to a new impulse to seize local state structures. He shows how Barcelona in Comú seeks to reshape political relations between city government and the citizens themselves; its vision of *municipalismo* situates city governments as central actors of social transformation beyond the local.

A COMMON MULTIDIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK

The analytic framework that all those studies build on centers on eight dimensions of transformation; they frame the multidimensional approach the Working Group has agreed on. Each of these dimensions is founded on an extensive thread of debates and experiences that we do not have the space to retrace in detail here. Both the previous work of the Latin American Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development (http://www.rosalux.org.ec/grupo/), which was founded in 2011 by the Quito office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, and of the Vikalp Sangam (alternatives confluence) network in India, which seeks to combine environmental sustainability with radical democracy and economic democracy (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/), has served as a basis for establishing this framework.

The first dimension involves the *de-commodification, or commonization, of some aspects of life*, which means liberating them from the predominance of marketized profit logics in order to re-center them on the capacity to control and reproduce life in both its material and symbolic dimensions. This has, for example, partly been achieved in Barcelona, where the new city government has not only limited the commodification and financialization of urban land and housing in the face of mass tourism, but also re-municipalized certain services and venues that were privatized or outsourced. In this way, it has opened up possibilities to ensure their collective, cooperative, or community-based management. In Mendha Lekha, the Indian village that chapter four focuses on, and that has opposed the global trend toward the privatization of common property resources and land grabbing, land, water, and forests have been declared a common property resource that is managed collectively for the benefit of all.

The second dimension looks at the *transformation of instrumental and predatory societal relations with Nature*, which have been constitutive of capitalist modernity and have intensified during neoliberal globalization. This dimension can be seen at work for example in Nabón in Ecuador, where in the aftermath of the so-called *green revolution* agro-ecological practices helped to restore soil fertility and food sovereignty. In Mendha Lekha, the conservation of community forests has provided ecological security. In Nigeria, community resistance against oil extraction made visible the enormous environmental costs of fossil fuel extraction and was linked to calls for environmental justice. And presenting a case from Venezuela, Edgardo Lander describes how the entrenchment of the oil rentier model is a continuation of the assault on Nature.

The third dimension refers to *overcoming patriarchal gender relations*, i.e. the sexual division of all forms of labor including care work, subsistence work, informal work, community work, as well as in terms of the dimensions of representation and decision-making, etc., in relation to the specific forms of patriarchy at work within the context in

question. With respect to patriarchal gender relations, the horizontal and rotating organization of the City Plaza Hotel and the Social Solidarity Medical Centre of Thessaloniki in Greece have challenged the established sexual division of labor; in Nabón in Ecuador, women at the top level of local government have initiated processes of de-patriarchalization, both structurally and symbolically.

The fourth dimension gauges the *introduction of more equitable social relations*, including the capacity to (re)distribute, to culturally sanction accumulation and inequalities, to de-stabilize capital accumulation and related strategies of regulation and governance, and to de-legitimize former hegemonic forces. In Hugo Chavez' Venezuela, levels of poverty and extreme poverty have been significantly reduced; moreover, a number of social policies have improved nutrition and housing, and millions of seniors have been included in public pension schemes. In Nigeria, both Ogoni and Ijaw community resistance and urban-based anti-capitalist mobilizations have contributed to de-stabilizing capital accumulation and the state's strategies for enforcing hegemony.

The fifth dimension, which looks at *overcoming discriminatory/racist inter-ethnic relations*, is an objective pursued in Nabón, Ecuador. Not only has the blatant racism of mestizos toward the indigenous population diminished, but mestizo villages are now also implementing mechanisms of assemblearian democracy that they have adopted from indigenous communities; in Greece, the two initiatives described in chapter seven constitute important flagship projects against racism and the rise of right-wing movements in the context of massive immigration. They have also envisioned forms of conviviality bringing together different ethnic groups.

The sixth dimension, the *generation of a specific basis of knowledge and experience* – not restricted to Western, science-based, "objective" expert knowledge – suited to initiate and push for social transformation, is best reflected in the two studies engaged in local-level analyses in Nabón and Mendha Lekha, where concrete efforts have been made to generate such a knowledge basis in order to strengthen community self-government.

The *capacity to build political communities of change* where existing internal power relations are collectively analyzed and addressed – the seventh dimension – is manifest in all six case studies presented in this book. Here it is important to point out that we understand community in a non-essentialist, dynamic, and plural way, and thus consider the term to include all forms of community, be they rural or urban, territorially bound or virtual.

The eighth dimension, finally, refers to the *enhancement of democracy* in terms of the decision-making and steering processes that guide transformation, which can include both traditional and well-known as well as new, experimental forms of democracy. We

do not understand democracy here as a given set of institutions and practices, but as an ongoing, open-ended collective process of democratization, which could be understood as a process of sharing and disseminating power. This is a further dimension present in all case studies, from the mobile parliaments in Nigeria, to the Gram Sabha in Mendha Lekha, to the manifold experiments with direct or neighborhood democracy launched in the context of *municipalismo* in Barcelona. In Venezuela as well, the limits of representative democracy have been extended both in the popular imaginaries and in practice, although in tension with tendencies toward centralization and unipersonal charismatic leadership.

Beyond these fundamental dimensions of social transformation, the studies explore a shared set of questions that orient the way in which they describe the respective experiences. These questions were formulated with the purpose of enhancing the *possibility of learning* from the case studies, which will inspire, we hope, other processes of change elsewhere. One of these questions therefore is aimed at identifying the specific sources of strength in a given experience, i.e. the cultural, spiritual, political, epistemic, or other elements that have emerged as milestones, as well as a movement's ability and mechanisms to learn from its own failures or mistakes, which we consider a quality fundamental to advancing social transformation. Inquiring into the determinant factors that help achieve a certain *durability of change* takes us in the same direction, as does learning about the role that alternative paradigms or worldviews such as *Ubuntu, Swaraj*, or *Buen Vivir* have played for the various movements.

Another question traces the relation between resistance and alternative-building within a specific process, or the dimensions of alternative-building that are already included in processes of resistance. Social processes of resistance and change are often challenged by powerful actors, who try to de-legitimize the inherent critique by accusing those who protest of being unable to provide viable solutions. Nevertheless, practices of resistance often anticipate alternative social, and sometimes economic, relations.

Moreover, the studies take into account the relation between transformative experiences and existing institutions on the one hand and their own instituent practices on the other. The notion of "instituent practices" has been shaped recently in the context of the various Occupy movements around the world between 2010 and 2013, but also in the context of the debates on anti-capitalist commons. How do institutions and movements relate to one another, and how can this relationship be made productive in the sense of an emancipatory politics, without setting up too rigorous boundaries between these two poles? This is a central question closely related to the challenge of making transformation durable (Nowotny & Raunig, 2016) (Lang & Brand, 2015).

Michel Bauwens from the P2P Foundation has the following understanding of what he calls instituent praxes: To institute does not mean to institutionalise in the sense of

rendering official, of consecrating or of recognising a posteriori what has already existed for some time (for example, in the form of habit or custom), nor does it mean to create out of nothing. It means to create the new with – and starting from – what already exists, as such in conditions passed down independently of our activity. A common is instituted by a specific praxis that we call "instituent praxis". There is no general method for the institution of any given common. Each praxis ought to be understood and carried out in situ or in loco. That is why we must speak of "instituent praxes" in plural (Bauwens, 2015).

Another important set of questions was related to the actors of transformation, their respective role, and their relation to each other. In which ways did the experiences of alternative-building relate to the State? To what extent have State regulations or State actions enabled, protected, or endangered them? To what extent has State intervention and repression been decisive for the processes? Did they make use of electoral dynamics, and if yes, on what scale, and with which outcome for the process? What role did external actors such as NGOs or aid agencies play, and in which way did these social processes of change connect with discourses or concepts of the political left, or forge alliances with actors of the political left? What was, in general, the role that the left played in those processes, and which school or current across the existing plurality of left voices was it? And what light did the experiences shed on international or global relations, or on interdependencies with other transformative processes elsewhere?

Authors were also encouraged to examine the technological patterns underlying these emblematic processes of transformation and take into account that the technologies available can, for example, make social processes more or less democratic, more or less sustainable, more or less dependent on corporations (Illich, 1973) (Vetter, 2017). Although references to this issue are still scarce in the book and the Group's debates about technological patterns have to be intensified, chapter six on Barcelona en Comú provides interesting insights into how digital platforms can be used for commoning and deepening democracy.

Finally, there was a set of questions revolving around the values and notions attached to the concept of "quality of life" that the experiences analyzed were built upon. A wide range of views on what a good life means, which differ from the dominant poverty indicators, are often made invisible by the mainstream discourses around economic growth and poverty eradication. Some of them are related to achieving autonomy and self-reliance, for example. What notions of a good life were at the forefront in each process, and what was achieved in these dimensions?

Of course, not all the studies included in this book address all these questions in the same way. Depending on each case, some dimensions of the analytic framework turned out to be more fertile than others, which has shaped each study in a different way. Moreover, time kept us from discussing all these issues in depth. Our discussions

ultimately focused on four big issues: The possibilities of deepening democracy, the role of the left and the State in multidimensional transformation, and pathways toward new forms of internationalism, solidarity, or inter-people relations that can respond to the challenges of our times.

What this shared analytic framework did achieve, however, is to help build a common ground for the Working Group's debates on multidimensional transformation, in spite of the vastly different perspectives of its members. This common ground allowed us to engage in an attempt to produce collective knowledge, which we share, as mentioned above, in the last chapter of this book, entitled "Beyond development: Stopping the machines of socio-ecological destruction and building alternative worlds".

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NIGER DELTA:
COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE

Isaac 'Asume' Osuoka

NIGERIA

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of World Bank- and IMF-inspired structural adjustment programs (SAP) in the latter half of the 1980s exacerbated economic problems in Nigeria, Africa's largest exporter of petroleum. Massive unemployment and growing hopelessness under the military regimes exposed social fissures and opened up new possibilities for anti-hegemonic mobilizations. By the turn of the decade, a new vibrant pro-democracy movement had formed. This movement had as its fulcrum the students' movement that had organized anti-SAP protests from 1986 onward. The student movement's network included radical university teachers, new human rights organizations, and sections of organized labor. Working together, the organizations led waves of mass protests against the military regimes during the 1990s. During the same period, a different type of mobilization emerged in the communities of the Niger Delta around oil and gas production sites. Beginning with the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and later the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), community movements engaged in struggles aimed at restructuring the colonial state in order to restore self-determination to communities. In 1990, MOSOP proclaimed the *Ogoni Bill of Rights*, which demanded, among other things, political autonomy as a means to achieve environmental justice. The proclamation triggered mass actions that resulted in a dual-power situation, with MOSOP advancing a radical alternative social agenda opposing the policies of the state and its allied capital. Mass protests and other direct actions by the Ogoni led to the halting of oil and gas production in the area when Shell pulled out in 1993.

Polluted Niger Delta aerial

As the Ogoni struggle radiated across the region, Ijaw communities also began to organize and disrupt oil exploitation activities.

The immediate targets of the Niger Delta community movements that formed in the 1990s were the oil companies that have polluted the natural environment and compromised local livelihoods. Petroleum exploitation in the Niger Delta has been causing massive pollution since production commenced in 1956, when Nigeria was still under British colonial rule. Since then, crude oil and gas production has had a deleterious impact on community livelihoods. Over the decades, petroleum exploitation has generated immense profits for the transnational corporations, and today accounts for over 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings, and over 80 percent of government revenues. By the 1990s, Nigeria was firmly among the top ten exporting countries globally, producing over two million barrels of crude oil daily. Petroleum infrastructure had become a main feature of the geography of the Niger Delta area. However, the local communities did not see any tangible benefits. Even worse, environmental pollution went hand in hand with human rights abuses as the state gave priority to protecting its oil assets. Members of communities in the Niger Delta came to see the petroleum industry as representing the state. While their protests targeted the oil companies, the community movements sought to create an alternative politics to transform the colonial state rather than just seek accommodation. The movements mobilized communities by forging a new understanding of environmental justice, resource control, and self-determination of ethnic nationality within Nigeria (Ikelegbe, 2005; Osaghae, 2001, 1995).

This chapter examines the Niger Delta community movements in Nigeria from the 1990s, and highlights the potentials and limitations of using ethno-communal identities to organize alternative mobilizations against neoliberal adjustment, destructive extraction, and other antagonistic practices of the state and transnational capital. In doing so, I shall depart slightly from the predominant narrative of petro-politics. Instead, this study is based on the recognition that the genesis of the conflict between the state and its allied transnational capital on the one hand and the communities on the other can be traced back to the pre-petroleum era when colonial corporations forcefully usurped sovereignty from communities in creating the Nigerian state. Thus, the next section begins with a brief discussion showing how the impact of colonialism provides a framework for understanding contemporary social tensions. A focus on the structure and character of the colonial state itself will make clear why and how members of communities seek to recreate local sovereignties. The hegemony of the state over the community has been historically amplified

by promises of Development.[1] The colonial state attempted to legitimize its claims of sovereignty over communities by staging itself as the patron of Development. In this case, the discourses of Development can be seen as tools of control. As part of this scheme, a community elite, beginning with "traditional rulers", whose role was established as part of indirect rule under colonialism, and warrant chiefs, is promoted to "represent" the community in making demands for amenities from the state. It is through these community elites that the state exerts control over the communities. The elite ensures that community members fall into line and act in manners acceptable to the state. As members of the community elite are privileged by the state through political appointments, contracts, and election participations, any alternative discourse and mobilization that challenges the state also represents a threat to the community elites.

In section three, I present the cases of the Ogoni and Ijaw communities in Nigeria, who were among the first to protest against environmental destruction and political marginalization. While their indignation against the petroleum industry sparked the events of the 1990s, the struggles against the state and allied transnational corporations make visible the ways in which communities seek to "restructure" the colonial state. These struggles also challenge the authority of the traditional ethnic elites. Within the Niger Delta communities, new structures of mobilization emerged to dislodge those traditionally patronized by the state, resulting in internal contests for hegemony over the communal public that continue up to this day. These cases highlight how the construction of political communities is a dynamic process in which attempts to build alternative communities, ways of life, and approaches to (re)production are continuously resisted by local powers tied to the state, and by a "civil society" tied to Western orthodoxies. Section four outlines the relationship between the Niger Delta movements and the traditional left and the pro-democracy movements of the 1990s. While contact between movements existed, the traditional left did not recognize the import of community mobilizations. Thus, urban-based anti-capitalist mobilizations became disconnected from community protests even though both were relevant to the de-stabilization of capital accumulation and the state's strategies for enforcing hegemony. Ultimately, the state's interventions shaped the way in which the Niger Delta struggles unraveled, and they took place in alliance with traditional elite clusters. Following a decade of mass actions, by the turn of the century the community movements found themselves increasingly mainstreamed into the state's scheme due mainly to counter-revolutionary actions undertaken by the communities' elites.

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1   Gillian Hart (2001) distinguishes *development* from *Development*. Spelled with a lower-case "d", the concept involves the contradictory and uneven processes that drive changes in societies. Written with an upper-case "D", the term is a more or less precise reference to the global aid industry. In my case, the capital "D" also describes state and oil industry projects involving the construction of social amenities.

COLONIALISM, THE STATE AND COMMUNITIES
BEYOND MILITARY RULE: "CRUDE" TECHNOLOGY, DOMINATION AND RESISTANCE

The community movements of the Niger Delta are in some ways responses to the way in which dominant energy technologies have been developed under colonialism. The alliance of the petroleum industry with the colonial state produces forms of social organization through which domination, control, and consent are enforced. For example, the large-scale exploitation of fossil fuels – whether in the form of crude oil or coal – has been a response to the demands of industrial society. Fossil fuel exploitation thus requires huge investments that can only be made by large corporations and financial institutions deploying accumulated capital. Such capital has historically been accumulated by dispossessing human populations and nature (the latter of its potential for regeneration). With profits tied to rises in the use of fossil fuels, over time the corporations involved in the production of the latter began to encourage general consumption patterns and values to increase dependence on such fuels. To feed the obsession for motorized vehicles and a lifestyle focused on consumerist behavior promoted by capitalist corporations, Western expeditions seeking natural resources have led to the enslavement and colonization of peoples. As early expressions of corporate rule, European corporations and their armed agents occupied territories in Africa and elsewhere. Colonizing corporations established state-like structures, including social infrastructure to facilitate the exploitation of minerals and other raw materials. When petroleum replaced coal as the primary fuel driving colonial-era industry, the state prioritized its alliance with oil and gas corporations over the protection of its communities, whose survival depends on their access to land. Via decree, the state claimed ownership of and control over communities' land, handing both over to corporations. Most communities that have been historically disadvantaged by these patterns of land use have not benefited from extraction. Thus, the Niger Delta community movements from the 1990s continue the earlier struggles of communities to reclaim land and use it for their survival.

Nigeria was created and ruled by a British corporation, the Royal Niger Company (RNC), originally the United Africa Company (UAC). Following the formal abolition of transatlantic slave trade, British merchants trading on other produce such as palm oil competed with other Europeans for control over African geographies. The fierce competition that characterized the "Scramble for Africa" was resolved by Europe's major powers at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, where they sat down around a map of Africa and divided up the continent among themselves. The boundaries were based on European economic interests, reflecting the demands of corporations. Among the members of the British delegation was George Goldie, one of the country's most powerful traders and founder of the UAC (Ikime, 1977; Flint, 1960). While the boundaries of the new

territories that were drawn up at the Berlin Conference satisfied European corporate power, for the African communities those boundaries were arbitrary, and disregarded both kinship and history.

By the time the Berlin Conference took place, British corporations were already expanding their territorial claims over the area that is now Nigeria using a mixture of brutal military assaults on the indigenous communities and double-tongued diplomatic expeditions (Ikime, 1977). In 1885, the British annexed the Niger Delta area, integrating it into their Oil Rivers Protectorate, a name that reflected the area's significance for the palm oil trade.[2] Yet another cause pushing colonization was the competition coming from French merchants, and the Germans, who were busy hoisting their flags in Cameroon, east of the Niger, and in Togoland, west of the Niger. It did not take long for the British government to grant one of its most powerful traders, George Goldie, the right to fly the Union Jack in the areas where his trading company was dominant. From that time on, Goldie's company became the official representative of the Crown in the "Niger area". There, the Company effectively became the state, assuming its new official name, Royal Niger Company, in 1886 (Flint, 1960). In a literal case of corporate rule, the company united the new colony's executive, legislative and judicial branches. Goldie's team then proceeded inland from the Atlantic coast of the Gulf of Guinea with gunboats, forcing local communities to accept their rule over the entire area in the name of "free trade", and killing anyone that resisted them.

The state was created by taking away sovereignty from communities. Fundamentally, the communities' experience of their loss of sovereignty was shaped by the fact of colonialism, as colonial corporate rule forcefully usurped their power to secure direct production. Even before formal colonial rule, under the brutal regimes of the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial enterprise, communal entities forged alliances to challenge early slave raiders, and then the invading colonial force that followed. Such reconfigurations of "community" continued under colonial rule and afterward, as communal entities resisted or made claims against the state. Crucially, even before the state's civil society (and its social stratification) took on form, the ethno-communal sphere was already well established as the antithesis to the complex formed by the state and transnational corporations.

Nigeria was still under colonial rule when petroleum was discovered in commercial quantities in 1956 in the Niger Delta. Since then, the immediate victims have been the inhabitants of communities whose livelihoods are severely impacted by pollution. As the production and export of crude oil predated political independence, the particular character of petroleum exploitation, targeted solely at the export market, ensured that

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2   The British renamed the area the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893.

oil rents shaped the political economy of the new state, which continued to operate as a joint venture with oil corporations. The dispossession of the communities of the Niger Delta was exacerbated by the fact that "the people" in this case are part of ethnic minorities with historically only marginal access to state power. Colonial Native Administrations and the construction of a federal system on the eve of independence favored the larger ethnic groups. Many minority groups, including the Ogoni and Ijaw, continued to struggle against internal domination even after independence (Naanen, 1995).

COLONIAL RULE AND KINSHIP SOCIETY

When civil society in "Africa" is examined through a Western lens, there are seeming incongruities, as society here appears to be very fragmented. Indeed, one of the most profound impacts of the creation of colonial states has been the creation of dual social spheres. The imposition of the colonial state via British commercial rule consolidated and extended kinship society into the state sphere, to contend with the state and, at other times to seek accommodation. To cope with the savagery of early colonial rule, clan ties were consolidated (Ikime, 1977; Tamuno, 2011). Clans and ethnicities were concretized as social forces and coalesced into different communities in order to confront an imposed state.

Prior to colonial rule, the village was the institution to exercise political sovereignty in most of the areas of the lower Niger. In some areas, villages were agglomerated into clans of common ancestry and other historical ties (Green, 1964; Dike, 1956). While there were indigenous kingdoms elsewhere (such as the Bini west of the Niger Delta), in the communities that are now identified as part of the Ogoni and Ijaw, political sovereignty resided with the village. Order within the village was subject to a kinship system that established a form of citizenship. In this case, the village was (and today still is) defined as a confederation of extended families, or compounds, existing within a contiguous territory. To belong, one had to be an accepted member of a compound. Belonging also ensured members' spiritual and material connection to the land, as people were sons or daughters of "the soil", which communities served as guardians. Those without family membership were alien to the community, and disconnected from humanity and nature. Describing the Bantu, Placide Tempels noted how "created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship, comparable with the causal tie which binds creature with Creator. For the Bantu, there is interaction of being with being, that is to say of force with force." (quoted by Kaphagawani, 2006: p. 337). A kinship system links the individual to the communal order through family membership. That is why exclusion from community membership is one of the severest punishments for perpetrators of serious crimes. For those whose belonging is not questioned, the strength of kinship bonds means that membership of the community continues even when such persons choose to reside outside community boundaries.

Within the community, daily village administration was participatory, involving members organized around age-grades, farm co-operatives, and other cultural institutions. In the event of wars with other communities, it was through the age-grade system that communal armies and defensive measures against slave raiders were organized. In peacetime, communal governance focused on the family in order to sustain (re)production. Families provided social security for their members, ensuring that all, or as much as possible, was provided for in periods of famine, or in times of economic hardship.

As the colonial state enforced its rule, a new political and mercantile regime produced conditions for social interaction within the state's administrative machinery, in warehouses, and across the entire infrastructure of colonial rule. As individuals were conscripted as laborers in the European enterprise, they were introduced into a colonial civic sphere. This new civil society was a limited space which the colonial system created, with some "rights" and a "rule of law" that enabled workers to interact with each other and their employers. Through such interactions, groups produced representatives for formal and informal collective bargaining, as well as for social exchanges. For many individual workers, however, this new civil society did not satisfy their yearning for kinship. Workers from the communities now had to operate within the new civil society as well as within the ethnic public sphere to which they remained connected. Ever since, the state's civil society and the ethnic public spheres have had to coexist as what has been described as the "two publics" (Ekeh, 1990) or the "bifurcated state" (Mamdani, 2002). There have, of course, been attempts to obliterate cultural differences and integrate all ethnic communities into a single civic sphere, and these have been fashioned around an "ideology of development" (Ake, 2001).

DEVELOPMENT AS COLONIAL "SOCIAL CONTRACT"

As shown above, the Nigerian state has not always existed. Rather, that state was created just over a century ago at a particular moment in history when corporations backed by the British crown sought to impose their power on previously existing communities. The state has so far succeeded in exercising its power while continuing its battle for hegemony over all the communities and geopolitical interests within its boundaries. As Gramsci explained, hegemony is not limited to dominance; the state has to "win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (Gramsci, 1971: p. 244). Unlike in the metropole, the colonial state denied its colonized subjects citizenship rights, and offered them Development instead. Unlike the rights that are granted to individual citizens within a single civic sphere, colonial Development was offered to communities that had been agglomerated into Native Authorities. As I will explain below with reference to the Ogoni (section three), the way in which these Native Authorities were imposed contributed to creating ethnonational identities that did not necessarily exist before: Colonialism in this way forced people to adopt new ethnic identities, sometimes

reconfigured or enlarged by colonial Native Authorities, as a condition for benefiting from Development. Development came to form a colonial *social contract*. But the state proved unable even to deliver on this minimum promise, which provoked increasing resistance and "nationalist" opposition to the colonial enterprise.

After the First World War the colonialists again drew on the discourse on poverty and security to justify their continued rule over colonized territories and their imperialist attachment to newly independent states. With poverty now seen as a threat to their strategic interests, they began to focus on the goal of eradicating Third World Poverty via International Development (Kiely, 1999; Escobar, 1995, 1999; Mamji and O'Coill, 2002; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Duffield, 2001, 2007). Through the prism of Development, "poor countries are known, specified, and intervened upon" (Escobar, 1999: p. 384) so that they can be forever made to engage in a race to catch up with the West (Amin, 2009). Thus, Development discourse promotes the processes and "interventions" through which public and private institutions provide specific amenities and initiatives to satisfy the communities' wants regarding different aspects of social life such as education and healthcare. Part of the goal of Development discourse is to increase both demand and expectations among project "beneficiaries" even though initiatives effectively serve corporations and the state. Very often, road and railway projects needed for the exploitation of minerals and other primary resources during the colonial period were promoted as Development projects. This pattern continued during and after independence, with the entire oil and gas complex, including the roads, pipelines, and export terminals making Nigerian petroleum accessible to the export market in Europe and North America, and more recently China, presented as Development infrastructure.

In the years following "independence" from Britain in 1960, Nigeria was embroiled in political crises as the local elites that took power were divided along ethno-national lines. As is common to other post-colonial states in Africa, pan-national identity was often promoted with the promise of Development for all. However, the way that state boundaries had been drawn by the colonial powers and decades of indirect rule had reinforced and created ethnic competition for Development benefits from the state, as state allocations under colonial rule were inadequate to meet demands. The ensuing political imbroglio in the newly independent states created conditions for military coups, some of which were sponsored directly by the former colonizing states. By 1990, military rule had become an established feature of public life in Nigeria. With the state exploiting the country's petroleum resources hand in hand with transnational corporations, the military elite not only backed international capital, but often also directly benefited from the revenues. While the exploitation of nature benefited transnational capital and local rulers, it effectively dispossessed the people.

In dealing with the people, Development discourse has served as a consent and control mechanism. In this case, as long as community discussions and responses are

focused on Development, the state's role is validated. As its "ethical content" (Gramsci 1971: p. 20), the state constructs its hegemony through three tiers of government – federal, state and local. Following independence in 1960, the number of federating units increased from three Regions to 36 States, as the military regimes drew up new borders in response to local agitations. The military regimes also created a total of 774 Local Government Areas. It is through these structures that the state implements and allocates Development, and reproduces the elite.

The community elites often strengthen their control over the community by staging themselves as being in the best position to represent the community in demanding Development from the state, and to compete with other ethnic communities. The alliance between the state and the community elite also serves to keep possible dissent in check. In the case of the Niger Delta where petroleum companies also award contracts for "Community Development Projects", the elites are the beneficiaries of such contracts. Here, as elsewhere, the elites, being materially connected to the state apparatus, often seek to protect the status quo. As members of ethnic communities, they seek to maintain their positions as community representatives to the state. They call for new local governments to be created for their communities, and call on oil companies to award more Community Development contracts.

The Ogoni territory has been carved into Rivers State, with the Ogoni villages distributed across three local government areas. Ijaw communities, in contrast, are spread across six States (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo, and Rivers) and about two dozen local government areas.

Women at the market, Rivers State

The community movements that emerged in the 1990s saw these tiers of government as structures of oppression. They demanded the restructuring of the state and the introduction of a system of democratic administration that would allow communities to determine the way they were organized within states and local government areas, and the autonomy of those units to give development efforts a direction that would benefit the people. They proposed alternative arrangements that would re-establish spaces for self-rule. However, the elite in most cases sought to subvert alternative community agendas. Members of the traditional Ogoni elite, including individuals who were among the founders of MOSOP, aligned with the state and oil companies to oppose the radical elements seeking to instill an alternative civic ethos across the Nigerian state.

COMMUNITY AND RESISTANCE IN THE NIGER DELTA
THE MOVEMENT FOR THE SURVIVAL OF THE OGONI PEOPLE (MOSOP)

In the late 1960s, the man who would later become the leader of Ogoni resistance, Ken Saro-Wiwa, identified 124 Ogoni villages. Until the colonizing British forces created the Ogoni Native Authority in 1917, the villages were autonomous and identified as belonging to the six clans of the Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana, and Tai. Each of the clans spoke mutually intelligible dialects of what is now known as the Ogoni language (Saro-Wiwa, 1968). Apart from the common language, political leadership was structured at the village level (Okonta, 2008). None of the dialects had a name for the amalgam of communities until the Ogoni Native Authority was created, initially as part of the Opobo Division of the Calabar Province. In 1946, the Ogoni Division was created and included in the Rivers Province.

The political fate of the Ogoni people would be determined above all by the way in which colonial boundaries shaped the later boundaries of States and local governments that were created as federal and administrative units under post-independence military rule. Beginning in the pre-independence period, a federal system of government was introduced that distinguished only the three largest ethnic groups in the country. The Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo were dominant in the Northern, Western and Eastern Regions respectively. Each of the Regions had minority ethnic groups that felt excluded from power. The Ogoni were included in the Eastern Region, where they felt marginalized. Such feelings of exclusion only amplified when petroleum was discovered and exploited in the territory from 1958 onward. As the central government and Eastern Region shared petroleum revenues, the Ogoni were concerned that oil money was being used to their disadvantage to develop far-away regional and federal capitals.

In 1967 when the country was embroiled in ethnically motivated violence and civil war following the coups of 1966, the military regime increased the number of federating units by splitting the three Regions up into twelve States (with additional states created by subsequent regimes).[3] When Igbo military officers sought to secede the Eastern Region (named Republic of Biafra) from Nigeria, the federal military government, as a wartime maneuver, split the Eastern Region in three. Two of the States comprised minority groups mainly. The Ogoni and Ijaw were included in the Rivers State.[4] Meanwhile, with the large regions broken up into states, the new federating units were stripped of their powers that became centralized in the federal capital (Nwajiaku, 2005; Suberu, 2001). The centralization of power in a central government dominated by Hausa and Fulani soldiers led to allusions to a "Northern Hegemony" or a rule by a "Hausa-Fulani Oligarchy" (Badmus, 2006; Ibrahim, 1999; Soyinka, 1994). Within Rivers State, the Ijaw were dominant, with ethnic groups such as the Ogoni feeling marginalized. These groups later began to push for States of their own (Nwajiaku, 2005; Ukiwo, 2007).

Sentiments of exclusion were pronounced in the petroleum-bearing Niger Delta, where pollution has been exacerbating impoverishment. The first major case of community resistance in the 1990s was recorded in Umuechem, an Etche community in Rivers State. In 1990, the members of the community launched peaceful protests against the Shell Petroleum Development Company, the Nigerian subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, to draw the company's attention to pending compensation claims over polluted farms and streams. The community members also demanded "development projects", blocking the access road to Shell facilities on their lands. The transnational company's response was to call in the military government, which sent the Mobile Police to disperse the protestors. The Mobile Police went into town and burnt down every building, killing everyone and all domestic animals they saw, including the community's "traditional ruler", who was killed in his home together with all his family members (Okonta and Douglas, 2002; Manby, 1999). Rather than deter community protests, the Umuechem Massacre emboldened the leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), which was formed the same year.

In 1990, the Ogoni, under the leadership of MOSOP, issued the *Ogoni Bill of Rights,* in which they observed that "the search for oil has caused severe land and food shortages in Ogoni – one of the most densely populated areas of Africa (…); that neglectful environmental pollution laws and sub-standard inspection techniques of the Federal authorities have led to the complete degradation of the Ogoni environment, turning our

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3   Nigeria presently has 36 States.

4   While the majority of Ijaw were included in Rivers State, other Ijaw
     communities were included in Bendel State and other states.

homeland into an ecological disaster." While the oil companies were a major subject of the Ogoni narrative, their demands were addressed to the state. The *Ogoni Bill of Rights* expressed the people's call for "political autonomy" or "self-determination", which would guarantee the communities' development.

In the case of the Ogoni and other Niger Delta communities, calls for political autonomy and self-determination did not entail seceding from the Nigerian state, but rather envisioned an Ogoni State that would become one of the federating units in Nigeria, or any other political arrangement that would enable the Ogoni to: "participate in the affairs of the Republic as a distinct and separate unit by whatever name called, provided that this Autonomy guarantees the following:

> Political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people.

> The right to the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development.

> Adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian national institutions.

> The use and development of Ogoni Languages in Ogoni territory.

> The full development of Ogoni culture.

> The right to religious freedom.

> The right to protect the Ogoni environment and ecology from further degradation."

(Saro-Wiwa, 1992)

A major feature of the Ogoni struggle was the representative nature of the organization under MOSOP. MOSOP was originally created as a socio-cultural organization by the Ogoni elite. Due mainly to the effort of Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP morphed into an umbrella organization. As such, MOSOP's members comprised organizations representing women, students and youth, traditional and cultural leaders, and faith-based groups. The majority of the Ogoni joined MOSOP via their primary organizations. MOSOP stimulated a sense of pan-communal ownership of the organization by encouraging all Ogoni to contribute a token fee for the running of the organization and the struggle. This sense of communal ownership was later reflected in the mass participation in the organization's campaigning activities. Apart from the proclamation of the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* at a mass rally of the Ogoni, there were protest marches and direct action campaigns that resulted in the shutting down of a number of oil wells operated by Shell.

MOSOP's campaigns resulted in a dual power situation, with the organization's leadership contending with the state and its allied companies and community elite. While the state and Shell sought to protect petroleum infrastructure and legitimize its operations through "community development" tokenism, MOSOP effectively mobilized community members to delegitimize oil production. Despite the militarization of the Ogoni

communities and numerous human rights abuses committed by the military task force deployed to the area, Ogoni youths did not back down. As a result of these Ogoni struggles, production of crude oil and natural gas ceased in the area in 1993 when Shell abandoned all oil wells, flow stations, and major installations within the Ogoni area. However, the company's pipelines still crossed through Ogoniland and continued to pollute the environment after 1993.

As the confrontation between the Ogoni and the state intensified, some members of the traditional elite disassociated from MOSOP and made public pronouncements critical of the organization and Ken Saro-Wiwa. In 1994, continuing tensions across Ogoni communities resulted in the mob killing of four of the most prominent members of the Ogoni elite, among them politicians and government contractors who were part of the initial leadership of MOSOP but spoke out against the organization's increasingly radical mobilizations. Following the killing of the Ogoni Four (Saale, 2017; Isumonah, 2004), Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other members of the MOSOP leadership were arrested and charged with murder at a military tribunal. In a hasty trial in 1995, from which Saro-Wiwa's lawyer withdrew as a result of perceived irregularities, Saro-Wiwa and eight MOSOP leaders were sentenced to death (Vukor-Quarshie, 1997). Ledum Mitee, Vice President of MOSOP, was released (Isumonah, 2004). Despite international outrage and appeals from global leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Saro-Wiwa and the eight other Ogoni leaders were executed ten days later, before they were able to appeal the sentence.

Even before this killing, the Ogoni struggle provided pictures conveying the real environmental costs of fossil fuel exploitation. The images of poor African communities waging struggles against a huge transnational oil corporation through mass rallies and other forms of cultural mobilization helped to galvanize Western environmental campaigners. Globally, this was a period in which environmental activists focused strongly on highlighting the links between fossil fuel consumption and the global climate crisis. The Ogoni struggle became a major reference point for the Shell Boycott campaign in Western Europe and North America. MOSOP was, at this stage, supported by international organizations such as Greenpeace and even The Body Shop, a chain of stores selling natural cosmetics. However, some have observed that the messages sent out by Western environmental organizations essentially failed to reflect the demands of MOSOP, which were more political and best understood in their particular Nigerian context (Okonta, 2008). They argue that while MOSOP's leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was successful in making the Ogoni struggle internationally visible by playing the green agenda, the environmentalists' fixation on big oil may have in fact sidelined MOSOP's political message, and privileged their narrow focus on petroleum pollution, thus excluding the crucial issues of political self-determination and "resource-control". In the years after the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP

increasingly professionalized into an NGO. Its campaigns tended to exclude radical demands, such as political autonomy, as included in the *Ogoni Bill of Rights*. After the "judicial murder" (Pegg, 2000) of the Ogoni Nine, a large number of the remaining leadership went into exile and dispersed across Africa, Europe, and North America. With MOSOP's leadership abroad, a bitter leadership battle ensued between Ladum Mitee and Owens Wiwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa's younger brother. The factionalization of MOSOP abroad adversely affected mobilization within the communities as local activists began to take sides. Abroad, the factions competed for donor support, and dissension ended only after the restoration of military rule in Nigeria in 1999 when some of MOSOP's leaders started to return to the country.

Following the restoration of military rule, the major factions of MOSOP prioritized environmental campaigns. While rallies were organized on the annual Ogoni Day and other symbolic occasions, MOSOP became increasingly dependent on Western donors to fund specific projects. Following calls by MOSOP, the second post-military federal government in 2007 invited the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to carry out an assessment of polluted sites in Ogoniland. The subsequent UNEP report, released in 2011, revealed that pollution "has penetrated further and deeper than many may have supposed" (UNEP, 2011). UNEP discovered that Ogoni community water sources were polluted by carcinogenic Benzene, with levels 900 times above World Health Organization guidelines. UNEP's call for the immediate cleanup of polluted sites has been met with slow responses from the federal government and Shell.

UNEP public meeting in Ogoniland

However, the report's release put a spotlight on Shell and Ogoniland, which may have influenced the company's decision to reach an out-of-court settlement with members of the Bodo, an Ogoni community (Hennchen, 2015) following earlier payments to families of the Ogoni Nine in 2009 (Pilkington, 2009). These limited settlements between Shell and the plaintiffs marked victories for the families of the victims of violence that had unsettled the area in the 1990s, and for some of the communities exposed to pollution after 1993. However, many more Ogoni communities lack the financial resources to sue Shell in North American and Europe.

Thus far, the people have resisted efforts by Shell and the Nigerian government to revive oil production in Ogoniland. Some members of the Ogoni elite, against popular sentiments in the communities, are trying to negotiate more favorable terms under which they would be willing to tolerate oil extraction activities in the area. However, among the Ogoni leadership, there remains a small group that is campaigning to keep the oil in the ground. All of them agree that the most pressing issue is to clean up polluted sites in Ogoniland based on the recommendations contained in the 2011 UNEP Report.

THE KAIAMA DECLARATION AND THE IJAW YOUTH COUNCIL (IYC)

The Ogoni's activism roused other communities across the Niger Delta, leading young Ijaw activists to create the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) in 1998 and adopt the Kaiama Declaration, which had the same thrust as the Ogoni Bill of Rights.

The Kaiama Declaration, which was embraced at the end of an All Ijaw Youth Conference in Kaiama Town, Bayelsa State, noted that: *It was through British colonisation that the IJAW NATION was forcibly put under the Nigerian State. But for the economic interests of the imperialists, the Ijaw ethnic nationality would have evolved as a distinct and separate sovereign nation, enjoying undiluted political, economic, social, and cultural AUTONOMY…The quality of life of Ijaw people is deteriorating as a result of utter neglect, suppression and marginalisation visited on Ijaws by the alliance of the Nigerian state and transnational oil companies. The degradation of the environment of Ijawland by transnational oil companies and the Nigerian State arises mainly because Ijaw people have been robbed of their natural rights to ownership and control of their land and resources through the instrumentality of undemocratic Nigerian State legislations such as the Land Use Decree of 1978, the Petroleum Decrees of 1969 and 1991, the Lands (Title Vesting etc.) Decree No. 52 of 1993 (Osborne Land Decree), the National Inland Waterways Authority Decree No. 13 of 1997, etc.*

The *Kaiama Declaration* also asserted that "all land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival." The Ijaw youths challenged "all undemocratic decrees that rob our

peoples/communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent" (Kaiama Declaration, 1998). They called for the "immediate withdrawal from Ijawland of all military forces of occupation and repression by the Nigerian State. Any oil company that employs the services of the armed forces of the Nigerian State to 'protect' its operations will be viewed as an enemy of the Ijaw people".

The Kaiama Declaration sparked a wave of mobilizations in Ijaw communities throughout the Niger Delta despite threats of military crackdown. The IYC organized Mobile Parliaments that moved from village to town and from town to village every fortnight promoting the idea of Ijaw self-determination. Despite fierce debates, these Mobile Parliaments often reached consensual decisions. From the beginning, the IYC appointed as a subordinate body a "collective leadership" of seven members. One of the early decisions of one of the Mobile Parliaments in December 1998 was the observance of a day of *Ogele*, a peaceful but warlike cultural procession with drumming and singing. This was to be organized in several Ijaw communities on December 30, 1998 to call on "all oil companies [to] stop all exploration and exploitation activities(…) pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta" (Kaiama Declaration, 1998).

Prominent in the preparations of the *Ogele* was the *Egbesu,* a religious practice which had been revived a few years prior to the Kaiama Declaration. Adherents see *Egbesu* as a deity of war whose priests participate in recruiting and disciplining community soldiers when the communities are threatened by external forces. For example, the *Egbesu* institution was central to the mobilizations against early colonial incursion in 1895 when coastal Ijaw communities of Akassa (Nembe) fought a war against the British Royal Niger Company over control of the palm oil trade. *Egbesu* became popular again among unemployed Ijaw youth during the heightened repression of the military regimes of the 1990s.

It may be due to the prominent role of the *Egbesu* adherents in the IYC mobilizations in 1998 that the Nigerian military government perceived the call for *Ogele* as a declaration of war. The junta responded by sending soldiers and the Mobile Police to Ijaw communities in Bayelsa State, who committed human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 1999). The Ijaw Council for Human Rights claimed that soldiers killed *Ogele* participants and other members of Ijaw communities (Environmental Rights Action, 1999). Nevertheless, mass participation in the *Ogele* promoted a reimagined sense of Ijaw nationhood and signaled the intent of the people to resist the alliance between the state and the Shell corporation. The *Ogele* was followed by a continuous program of direct actions tagged Operation Climate Change, which involved road blockades and the occupation of oil installations, with people demanding the companies shut down oil wells and stop gas flaring.

As with the Ogoni, the Ijaw struggle was supported by Western NGOs. At one point in early 1999, over two hundred international organizations, mostly from Europe and North America, endorsed an open letter to all major transnational oil and gas producing companies operating in Nigeria in which the companies were asked to suspend their operations in the country. The letter acknowledged the demands of the IYC, stressing that "the Ijaw, like the Ogoni before them, [are] demanding their rights to clean air, water, and land by exercising the rights to peaceful protest and assembly. Oil operations, backed by the state security apparatus, have denied the Delta communities these rights" (Niger Delta Alert, 1999: p. 1).

The immediate success of the post-*Kaiama Declaration* mobilizations of the Ijaw masked internal contests for hegemony within the movement. Just like the Ogoni movement, the IYC agglomerated different organizations that all had distinct expectations regarding the struggle. Initially, the internal contest was managed through the selection of a Collegiate Leadership at the first IYC Mobile Parliament in December 1998. None of the seven members, who each represented different tendencies, was superior to the other.[5] Besides dealing with internal differences, the youths also saw themselves contending with members of the Ijaw elite, referred to as the elders. Some of the prominent Ijaw elders were openly hostile toward the Kaiama Declaration and the IYC from the beginning. In the first place, they felt slighted that the youths were attempting to set an agenda for the Ijaw without seeking their permission. Some organizers of the All Ijaw Youth Conference did not have much respect for the elders, who were considered to be too collusive with the Nigerian state (Ogon, 2012). After the Kaiama Declaration, the elders resorted to measures aimed at stifling the emergent youth resistance. However, it should be noted that while the most politically influential Ijaw elders sought to destroy or appropriate the IYC, the majority of older men and women in the Ijaw communities welcomed the IYC and lent their support to its campaigns (Nathaniel, 2012).

CONTESTS FOR HEGEMONY AND THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY
COMMUNITY MOVEMENTS AND THE POLITICAL LEFT

One of the major disappointments of the 1990s was the disconnectedness of traditional left organizations, which operated through the pro-democracy movement and community resistance organizations such as MOSOP and the IYC. While all these movements seek social transformation and aim to restructure the colonial state, an encompassing counter-hegemonic discourse and vision did not exist to encourage joint mobilization.

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5   The IYC elected a more traditional Executive Council complete with President, General Secretary, and other officials in 2001.

The left's fixation on the working class did not include an adequate analysis of people's connection with ethnic communities. Also, the left did not seem to understand the partnership between the state, which uses the ethnic publics and the ethnic elites to entrench its rule via the promise of Development, and the elites, which depend on state patronage to secure economic benefits.

Like in other petroleum-exporting countries in the Gulf of Guinea, in post-independence Nigeria capital accumulation was often directly linked to individuals and groups closely connected to state power. Relevant to this understanding is the way that other industries, including agro-industries, were suffocated by the pressures of rentierism, which expanded under the dictates of structural adjustment. Under those conditions, political struggles of the left were often framed as anti-imperialist struggles, and also as pro-democracy struggles, especially from the late 1980s onward. Working through organized labor and the students' movement, the Nigerian left organized massive mobilizations against the structural adjustment policies from the late 1980s onward. These mobilizations culminated in the pro-democracy movement, which emerged at the same time. By the beginning of the 1990s, new human rights NGOs were in alliance with the left in the struggle against the military. The pro-democracy movement included civil society coalitions such as the Campaign for Democracy (CD), the United Action for Democracy (UAD), the Democratic Alternative and the National Conscience Party (NCP). Each of these coalitions, which were dominant at different times, were led by members of human rights NGOs, radical lawyers, the students' movement, and segments of organized labor. The pro-democracy movement represented a conscious effort by the Nigerian left to intervene in politics, not just by removing the military dictators, but also by introducing an alternative power base to contend with the Nigerian political elite. The pro-democracy groupings mobilized mostly university students but also the unemployed, poor, and other socially dispossessed people in the urban centers, particularly in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos. However, there was no organization with mass support or a sustainable member base. People simply responded to particular mobilizations and dispersed afterwards.

Even when the pro-democracy movement was on its way to becoming the major force in Nigerian civil society in the 1990s, the left did not have a clear position on the ethnic mobilizations that were taking place at the time. Some of the leaders of the Niger Delta resistance movements, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa, joined pro-democracy coalitions. However, many members of ethnic communities in the Niger Delta, including the Ogoni and Ijaw, did not respond to the campaigns of pro-democracy groups. Part of the reason for this disconnect was that the demand for democracy in itself did not address the real concerns of members of these communities. Anti-capitalist orthodoxy failed to resonate within ethnic public spheres, in particular because

traditional socialist organizations severely disapproved of all ethnic identifications in their attempts to amalgamate the working class. Orthodox Marxism, represented in the main by left parties, and an increasingly bureaucratized labor movement, were both unable to address the challenges produced by an increasingly neoliberalized state. One of the most profound effects of neoliberalism promoted through structural adjustment was to usher in the process of de-proletarianization, which weakened the working class as a political force. In Nigeria, by the beginning of the 1990s the industrial sectors were collapsing. Large-scale production was mostly restricted to the extraction of natural resources, especially petroleum. Many workers lost their jobs and returned to their villages and ethnic communities for refuge. University students graduated and returned home without jobs. It was the atmosphere created by structural adjustment that sparked a new wave of ethnic mobilizations as reflected in the Ogoni and Ijaw cases.

With the traditional Left and the mainstream political elite failing to produce a counter- articulation to dominant economic policies and to organize political action to accommodate marginalized ethnic communities, groups such as MOSOP and IYC emerged with their own narratives. Across the world, grassroots social movements emerged to make bold political statements of their own (Robinson, 2008; Ceceña, 2008). As Ana Esther Ceceña puts it: "Urban and rural collectives, people forced into precarious employment, displaced people, informal workers, nomadic collectives, men and women of every background" were creating new communities around issues such as access to land, water, and jobs, and in collective opposition to the World Bank, the IMF, and the state's denial of the right to self-determination (Ceceña, 2008: p. 237). It was the impacts of structural adjustment that spurred indigenous uprisings in Latin America. The revolts that were engendered by these movements "often begin in communities firmly rooted in a particular place" (ibid., p. 238), as the uprisings of the Ogoni and Ijaw communities, the struggles over water in Cochabamba, Bolivia, the landless peasants in Brazil and Bolivia, etc. show. In these cases, existing social dualisms, or "two publics" (or "dual society"; see Barret et al., 2008) fueled crises as indigenous populations and local communities sought to assert themselves against the force of state intervention.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE VERSUS ELITE REPRESENTATION

As exemplified by MOSOP and the IYC, conflicts between youths and elites point to deeper disputes between those who resist and those who support state hegemony. As explained above, the colonial state presented Development to communities as a mechanism to seek consent in dealing with subjects via Native Authorities and other administrative structures. From early on in colonial rule, "traditional rulers", warrant chiefs, and other members of the community elites were coopted or installed by the

state to represent the people. The custom of ethnic elite representation continued after independence, with politics serving to reproduce the regime of hegemony via elections or appointment by military regimes. Until MOSOP was established in the 1990s, politics and the processes of political representation in the Niger Delta were determined almost exclusively by traditional politicians and the elites of the various ethnic groups and nationalities. When necessary, these elements worked together via different elite platforms, through which they then called for Development projects to increase the scope of (their) participation in the state's schemes. Apart from periods when these elites were seen electioneering to support particular candidates, they did not mobilize for mass actions. Rather, they cozied up to any serving government by writing letters or seeking opportunities for curtesy calls to top government officials which they usually used to present demands for Development projects. Thus, the elites became used to acting on behalf of the people. However, from the 1990s onward, MOSOP and the IYC (re)defined the character and purpose of community mobilization and representation.

The examples of MOSOP and the IYC show the important role played by the ethnic youth in the Niger Delta resistance against the state and big oil corporations. In both cases, association with the youth movement had little to do with age. Many active members of youth groups who participated in the Ijaw struggle and other community movements in the 1990s were well over forty. Though the IYC later defined youth as people below the age of forty, in reality many older people continued to remain active, as they considered themselves "young at heart", as a grandfather involved in the Ijaw youth scene explained (Nathaniel, 2012). What is more fundamental to the understanding of the youth movement here is how they positioned themselves against state power. Youth are those who felt marginalized, poor, and who were often unemployed, or in precarious employment. Youths were also generally dissatisfied with the guidance provided by the cultural and political community elders. The Niger Delta community struggles were thus a "youth" revolt against the state and its local and international agents. Rather than being exclusivist elite institutions of representation, the Congress of MOSOP and the Mobile Parliaments set up by the IYC were tools to strengthen internal democracy within the communities and create more representative structures for community representation. However, these structures and the communities' public spheres remain contested spaces in which elites and subaltern forces compete to defend state hegemony, or to counter it. In their defiance of state hegemony, the community movements of the 1990s promoted the idea of "resource control" as part of a discourse challenging the state as a political apparatus imposed by colonialism. Instead, the movements focused on land rights and the "right to political, economic, cultural and environmental Self-Determination of all communities (…) [and] the right of nationalities to be recognised and respected as communities, and to

be granted the right of political autonomy(…) to organise and manage their resources to assure their social development" (Social Action, 2007).

The Niger Delta movements, like the pro-democracy movement, called for a restructuring of the state via a National Conference that would draft a new constitution for the country. The military regimes rejected those demands, and backed by the United States and the European Union, insisted on conducting elections in 1999 based on a constitution that was drafted by the military and adopted by decree without involving Nigeria's citizens. Since then, the transition to so-called democracy has been consolidated through subsequent general elections, which were held in2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015. These five elections produced four different presidents, two of whom are ex-military dictators, while another has direct family ties with former military dictators.[6] In the Niger Delta, the community resistance movements were also weakened following the elections in 1999, as neither the MOSOP nor the IYC endorsed candidates. The IYC in fact mobilized the Ijaw against participating in the 1999 elections, calling instead for a National Conference to precede elections. However, the traditional politicians from both nationalities nevertheless actively participated in the elections as candidates and supporters of the three political parties that the military regime allowed to stand for the 1999 elections. Of these, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which was the party favored by the regime, became dominant in the Niger Delta area.

Periods of electioneering, when money, looted from state coffers, are handed over to local politicians, provide opportunities for the ethnic elites to exert their influence. As such, partisan political pressure, backed by money, further helped to undermine community movements. Politicians in the Bayelsa and Rivers States recruited many IYC members and gradually succeeded in eroding the organization's radical political character. Ogoni and Ijaw politicians previously never associated with the community movements emerged as elected representatives, suddenly became very influential, and worked to shift the focus of the narrative of these movements away from the struggle for self-determination to demanding Development projects. In the case of the Ijaw, the IYC was further weakened by emergent Ijaw politicians who succeeded in hijacking the organization's leadership following the 2001 elections. At the same time, the politicians recruited Ijaw activists as political thugs in the run-up to the 2003 elections. In 2010, the IYC overwhelmingly backed Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan, an Ijaw, to take office as President following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua. In the following year, IYC officials supported Jonathan's

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6   Two of the presidents elected in Nigeria since 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhamadu Buhari, were ex-military dictators. A third, Musa Yar'Adua, is a younger brother of Shehu Yar'Adua, who was a military general and second-in-command in the regime of General Obasanjo.

renewed candidature, whose political ambitions were almost fully aligned with Ijaw interests.

On their part, the Ogoni elite aspired to elect one of their own as governor of Rivers State. By 2013, MOSOP made installing an Ogoni as Governor of Rivers State in the 2015 General Elections its primary goal, and it campaigned hard to win the support of the political elite from other ethnic groups in Rivers State. Following a congress in 2013, a MOSOP Communique stated that "the congress decried the marginalization of Ogoni occasioning our denial of fair representation at the national and state levels. The marginalization has regrettably deprived our berth at the highest level of government in Rivers State (…) Congress resolved that come 2015, Ogoni will accept nothing less than the position of the governor of Rivers State" (MOSOP, 2013). However, the Ogoni failed to secure the post in the 2015 elections. None of the two main parties, neither the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) nor the All Peoples Congress (APC), were willing to embrace an Ogoni candidate.

Nevertheless, since1999, when electoral politics was restored, the alternative mobilizations and discourses of the community movements have been privatized by the ethnic elite and turned into projects for advancing the political interests of those connected to the state. But even more fundamental is the fact that the elites have succeeded in recalibrating the movements' narrative such that they now frame the securing of political posts and Development projects as the most effective way to serve community interests. In this way, the restoration of politics as usual via periodic elections only undermines alternative mobilizations that advance popular power.

The military junta allowed only three political parties to participate in the 1999 general elections. Initially, the only two parties, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Peoples Congress (APC), both backed by former military dictators, retired generals, and their political allies, were accepted by the junta to have met the necessary requirements. A third party, the Alliance for Democracy (AD), which represented the Yoruba elite, was also allowed to participate in the elections. The implication of allowing only three political parties to participate in the 1999 elections is that the transition to democracy in Nigeria excluded many political persuasions, including the major pro-democracy coalitions such as Campaign for Democracy (CD), the United Action for Democracy (UAD), the Democratic Alternative (DA), and the National Conscience Party (NCP). Their exclusion led pro-democracy activists to monitor the elections – a role assigned to them by Western donors such as the United States Agency for International Development. Yet as monitoring institutions, the platforms previously backed by the left have become increasingly depoliticized, with elections massively rigged in favor of parties aligned with the ruling elite.

The NCP challenged the electoral commission's power to prevent political parties from registering. In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NCP and ordered the electoral commission to open up electoral participation for all political parties ahead of the 2003 elections. By that time, however, the pro-democracy organizations had become weak, while the parties close to the elites had been able to consolidate their power.

Child standing at Shell-oil polluted river bank, Ogoniland

CONCLUSION

Nigeria has taken on its own distinct post-colonial form, with the state reflecting a character that is uniquely "Nigerian" due to the state's socio-historical and spatial specificities. This character, however, is informed by several factors, including the historical legacies of colonialism, which imposed their hegemony on pre-existing communities. It has taken brute force in many instances to compel new subjects to transfer loyalties to the new state. Since then, the materiality of the state has found expression in a number of instruments of coercion and bureaucracy. Studying the way in which the country's elite has since the eve of independence embraced the colonial promise of Development in order to establish and legitimize power provides us with an understanding of the character of the state.

This context is important for an analysis of how the Niger Delta mobilizations threatened existing powers and allied capital. Their cases demonstrate how social movements can be strengthened by cultural symbols and associated modes of organizing, as well as the limits of those tools. In the 1990s, these struggles,

alongside left-led pro-democracy struggles, contributed to the collapse of a military regime and the eventual re-introduction of civil government in Nigeria. Outside Nigeria, the resistance of the Ogoni was a major motivating factor for the Shell Boycott campaign in Western Europe and North America. There were many parallels between the Niger Delta struggles and the Nigerian pro-democracy movement and the global environmental movement. All of them identified military dictatorship and transnational oil companies as obstacles to building a better society. But they had diverging understandings of the nature of such an alternative society. Each of the movements expressed tendencies reflecting the dominant currents within it. Ultimately, the pro-democracy movement wanted an end to military dictatorship and the establishment of multi-party democracy that would give the masses a government. The state and international capital responded by holding elections that effectively subverted pro-democracy goals. In the case of the environmental movement, the UNEP Report on Ogoniland provided an opportunity to demand the cleaning up of polluted sites. Concerning the fundamental community demand for the restructuring of the colonial state, nothing has been achieved. Instead, there is a privatization of popular resistance when organizations such as MOSOP or IYC are hijacked by their ethnic elites in order to integrate them into the accumulation processes of the state, both through political power and the way in which Development projects are called for and implemented via the awarding of contracts. Thus, the cases make visible how state hegemony and capital accumulation are entrenched through the intimate relationship between the state, capital, and ethnic elites.

While traditional left organizations, environmental justice organizations, and community resistance organizations in Nigeria all seek social transformation, what has been lacking is an encompassing counter-hegemonic discourse and vision. Crucially, a new left discourse should identify how to bridge this disconnect through community mobilizations. First, we need to understand the causes of this disconnect. They can be traced back to the rift in society created by colonial rule. Colonialism introduced a new citizenship linked to the state to be exercised by civil society, which – it was hoped – would be mobilized. But with independence, this political sphere of citizenship was not ready to contend with a resurgent sphere of kinship, which emerged initially to protect people from the violence of the state.

Mao Tse-Tung pointed out that "there are many contradictions in the process of development of a complex thing, and one of them is necessarily the principal contradiction whose existence and development determines or influences the existence and development of the other contradictions" (Tse-Tung, 1937). It is my contention that in the case of Nigeria the principal contradiction is that between the state and the community. It is this principal contradiction that primarily shapes the actions of power

clusters within civil society, and the state's mode of rule and cooptation. I agree with Mamdani that it is the mode (or "form") of rule that shapes the form of resistance to it (Mamdani, 1996).

Whenever social relations produce contradictions, the hegemony of the dominant force is thrown into question. Traditionally, brute force has been the main instrument of the state in dealing with indignant communities. However, the promise of Development, which includes the possibility of social advancement for community members in the state system, has served as an overwhelmingly successful mechanism to create community consent for state policies. In particular, the community itself becomes implicated in empowering the state through the support that it gives to its members to participate in the state's business in one form or the other. But the most fundamental aspect is the backing of community members to participate in state rule via military appointments, political appointments, elections, and indeed by any other means deemed acceptable. The expectation is that such individuals will facilitate the fulfillment of the state's Development promises. It needs to be pointed out, however, that the support for the ethnic elite within kinship society is not automatic. This is because kinship society itself is a battleground on which forces of community resistance contend with elites whose traditional dominance over this sphere hinges in the main on the support they receive from the state. We see this manifested in Ogoni and Ijaw communities, where the elites that are most directly connected with the state have contended for control over the MOSOP and the IYC respectively. In both cases, the dominant force in the battle to extend kinship into the state sphere determined the degree of representation of that community in the state's civil, or political sphere. What is thus needed to bridge the ideological gulf between the traditional left and community activists is a counter-hegemonic discourse based on an understanding of Nigeria's post-colonial realities.

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THE
BOLIVARIAN EXPERIENCE:
A STRUGGLE TO
TRANSCEND CAPITALISM

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VENEZUELA

STRUGGLES TO OVERCOME CAPITALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela was the first attempt in the world to carry out a socialist transformation in the 21st century. As a consequence, the debates about the Venezuelan experience have dealt not only with the actual political processes going on in Venezuela since 1999, when Hugo Chávez became president, but also in much broader terms with the possibilities, potentials, and limits of socialism in this century. This paper focuses specifically on the Venezuela experience, but this will be done within the context of ongoing Latin American debates about the so-called turn to the left with the emergence of "progressive" governments in most of South America, as well as current global debates about viable alternatives to capitalism.

The challenges faced today in the endeavor to overcome capitalism are greater and far more complex than were imagined in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today we face not only the crisis of capitalism, but also the terminal crisis of the civilizational pattern of modernity that has been imposed on the entire planet for the last five centuries. This civilizational pattern is threatening human and non-human survival. In order to think/act/create alternatives to this crisis of civilization, it is essential to tackle it in its extraordinary complexity. We face not only a society of class exploitation/domination, but also a colonial, anthropocentric, racist, patriarchal, homophobic society, a society that, despite liberal discourses on multiculturalism, can only conceive as possible, as "modern," one particular way of life, and asserts the hegemony of its Eurocentric modes of knowledge. A society with deep and growing inequalities that has naturalized a state of permanent war.

The theoretical and policy instruments that seemed adequate in the previous two centuries for the struggle to overcome capitalism are today extremely blunt, partial, and reductionist tools. The issues and lines of confrontation that were privileged by the anti-capitalist struggles of the past centuries are not only no longer sufficient for addressing the challenges that we confront today; they also continue to downplay the importance of other basic dimensions of domination.

The experience of socialism in the 20th century, beyond its social achievements, its confrontations with imperialism, and its central role in the defeat of Nazi Germany, failed as a civilizational alternative to capitalism and to colonial modernity. In very schematic terms, the main dimensions of this failure can be summarized as follows:

> The anthropocentric and Eurocentric visions of modernity, embodied by capitalism, were not challenged. On the contrary, the prevailing economism and the notion of progress were radicalized. Overcoming capitalist societies in terms of production became a benchmark of progress toward communism. (Tons of cement, tons of steel). This led to a deepening of the modern anthropocentric and patriarchal attack on nature that threatens the conditions on which the reproduction of life depends.

> An uncritical faith in capitalist science and technology, in the so-called productive forces of capitalism that were supposed to provide the material basis for the construction of a socialist society.[1]

> The criticism of liberal democracy as bourgeois: class democracy led to the cancellation of any form of democracy, leading to the creation of authoritarian states where dissidents were regarded as enemies of the people.

> Its focus on state and party as the agents of change led to the complete lack of autonomy of many other areas of society, radically impoverishing its multiform fabric, repressed alternative memories, and blocked the processes of social experimentation without which it is not possible to build another world.

> There was no recognition of the extraordinary value of the plurality of the planet's cultures, leading to a radicalization of the colonial monoculture of modernity, now in the name of a universal proletarian culture. Diversity was limited to folklore.

> A lack of effective incorporation of the multiple dimensions of social life beyond the economy (cultural diversity, patriarchy, racism, sexualities, subjectivities, relations with "nature" and other patterns of knowledge) as essential to the possibility of radical social transformation.

Socialist societies of the 20th century ended in abrupt or gradual transitions to capitalism, often savage forms of capitalism where corrupt mafias and global corporations have prevailed.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the idea of socialism as an alternative to capitalism lost much of its appeal not only in Europe but in much of the rest of the world. Although the idea of socialism did not disappear from the political lexicon, it became rather marginalized. This was by no means the end of anti-capitalist struggles, but most of these took other courses, other subjects, other political grammars, other imaginaries, other utopias, and other organizational dynamics. The most vigorous expressions of this new post-socialist phase of anti-capitalist struggles were processes such as the World Social Forum, with its multiple and heterogeneous

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1 The most important exceptions were the *proletarian biology* of Lysenko in the USSR and the radical questioning carried out during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

themes and expressions of struggles for another possible world. In contrast to previous anti-capitalist struggles, political parties were essentially marginalized and the idea of state capture did not have a prominent place on the agenda.

With the so-called progressive governments in Latin America, especially with the Bolivarian Revolution, the notion of socialism gained new life. These political processes have appeared to consider and propose alternatives to most of the limitations and criticisms that had been discussed in relation to the socialist experience of the 20th century, in the form of so-called "21st-century socialism." The following aspects have been particularly important:

> The political dynamics leading to these new governments were not led by political parties but by a wide and diverse range of social movements, peoples, and communities.

> Critical debates on development and on other modes of human interaction with nature or Mother Earth[2] were carried out. In Ecuador and Bolivia the rights of nature were recognized for the first time in constitutional or legal terms.

> Interculturality and plurinationality, the recognition and celebration of the rich diversity of peoples, communities, traditions, and memories present in these societies, despite five centuries of colonial and republican monocultural states.

> In Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia the Constitutions incorporated notions of participatory and/or communitarian democracy. It is significant that these forms of democracy were not embraced as alternatives (or substitutes) to representative democracy, but as ways to deepen and radicalize democracy.

In any attempt to evaluate the experience of these so-called progressive governments from the perspective of their anti-capitalist transformative potential and in their contribution to building alternatives to the current crisis of civilization, it is essential to go beyond the single axis, from which a large part of the tradition of the left has focused its analysis. Namely: class relations (to what extent has the correlation of forces been altered in favor of the popular sectors? Has there been a redistribution of power and wealth?) and geopolitics (primarily positions relative to imperialism).

Governments whose discourse appeals to "popular" anti-imperialism have been considered as "progressive" or "left-wing" almost regardless of their policies in other areas of the structures of domination. It's worth re-emphasizing: power relations, exclusion, and domination in contemporary societies are more complex and multidimensional.

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2   Mother Earth is a widespread term used by indigenous people throughout the Americas. However, from some feminist perspectives, this is a patriarchal characterization of nature as the place where life and culture are created and reproduced, and is conceived as a maternal protector, virginal and immaculate, similar to the way in which the patriarchy understands women.

These can hardly be understood within the reductionist conceptions that were previously considered to be sufficient for accounting for the main issues implicated in the transformative struggles against all forms of domination. Today there is no single axis, no principal contradiction that is able to capture the complexity of the challenges posed by the current civilizational crisis.

These concerns will guide the analysis of the Venezuelan experience of these years. This will be carried out in the following sequence. First, the paper deals with the historical background that made the Bolivarian revolution possible. Secondly, the basic characteristics of the initial Bolivarian project will be discussed, followed by the most significant highlights and achievements of this political process. All this will provide the basis for the critical/analytical analysis of the Bolivarian experience ("Tensions, contradictions and limitations of the Bolivarian process as a transformative experience"). The paper ends with a reflection on what can be learned from this social transformation, as well as some general political conclusions.

THE TERMINAL CRISIS OF THE OIL RENTIER STATE

The political system that replaced the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958 was characterized during its first two decades by sustained economic growth, a relative improvement in the living standards of the popular sectors of society, and a significant degree of legitimacy.[3] However, in the late 1970s the country entered a prolonged economic, political, and cultural crisis. This marked the beginning of the terminal crisis of the oil rentier state (and society) that had prevailed for most of the century. In immediate terms this was expressed in a sustained reduction of per capita oil income which limited the state's ability to meet the demands of the population. The two major parties, Acción Democrática and COPEI, had been transformed into clientelistic and corrupt electoral machines that were increasingly distancing themselves from their previous support bases. There was also a significant and sustained displacement of what had been the hegemonic social democratic imaginary, with the emergence of a strong ideological offensive characterized by anti-state liberalism and anti-politics.

This increasingly excluded the popular sectors, even from political discourse (Lander, 1995a). These trends had a turning point at the beginning of the second government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989), when the implementation of the package of structural adjustment policies under the Washington Consensus was announced. These adjustment policies were required by the IMF so the country could obtain new loans despite its severe budgetary constraints and difficulties in paying its foreign debt. These neolib-

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3   This in spite of the guerrilla struggle that took place in the country
     during the 1960s, inspired by the Cuban Revolution.

eral adjustments had already occurred in most of Latin America, but they had been postponed in Venezuela thanks to its high oil revenues. February 27, 1989, while the Venezuelan delegation that was to sign the *Letter of Intent* agreeing to the adjustment policies with the IMF was in Washington, saw the first day of the *Caracazo*: massive looting and popular protests that took place in major urban centers over several days on a scale unknown in Venezuelan history. After some initial confusion, the government responded with a brutal repression that caused hundreds of deaths.

The impact of these adjustment policies was devastating for workers and the subaltern world in general. There was a sharp reduction in real wages and the share of labor compensation in national income. Labor costs in industry were substantially reduced. According to the methodology that measures poverty in terms of money income, there was a significant increase in levels of poverty and extreme poverty. There was a qualitative leap in inequality. All this translated into a deterioration of living conditions, limiting access to employment and food for a significant proportion of the Venezuelan population (Lander, 1995b). The result was the final shattering of any illusion of legitimacy of the political system. Discontent with and detachment from the political system became widespread, particularly in the subaltern sectors of society, but there was no visible political alternative on the horizon. Overall, the left was weak. It had been defeated in the armed struggle of the 1960s, and did not present a credible electoral challenge to the weakened but still dominant political parties.

A few years later, as an expression of the fact that this discontent had spread to the armed forces, on February 4, 1992, there was an attempted *coup d'état* led by Hugo Chávez. A second attempt occurred in November of the same year. Chávez, a career officer in the army, had created the underground Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 in the early 1980s. This clandestine military organization had been radicalized by contact with some leaders of small radical leftist parties. The majority of the population reacted to these events with calm expectation. There were no significant popular reactions to these coup attempts by military officials who were unknown to most of the population. This confirmed the depth of the crisis of legitimacy. Almost instantly, Chávez became an important symbolic reference point.

This crisis continued for a few more years. In 1993 Carlos Andrés Pérez was ousted from the presidency on corruption charges, and in the presidential elections that followed, for the first time since 1958, the new president was not nominated by Acción Democrática or COPEI. Rafael Caldera, who had been the founder and main leader of the latter party, created a new party and in alliance with some small leftist organizations won the elections with an anti-neoliberal program. Caldera, after surviving the deepest financial crisis in the history of the country during his first years in office, and following a long period of indecision, negotiated an agreement with the IMF under the name of

the *Venezuela Agenda* and implemented the basic guidelines of the neoliberal agenda that he had questioned.

The consequences of the reform of the Labor Law which drastically reduced social benefits for workers and of the policies of the opening up and internationalization of the national oil industry were particularly severe. In synthesis, these policies contributed to the deepening of the widespread distrust in the political system. In the late 1990s, Venezuelan society was deeply divided along economic, political, and cultural lines, and was facing a severe economic crisis that caused a prolonged deterioration of the living conditions of the majority of the population. Its political system was deeply discredited.

When Chávez won the elections in December 1998, he gave a voice and a sense of hope and direction to that widespread discontent.

THE INITIAL CHAVISMO PROJECT

When Chávez was elected in 1998, he became president in a particularly unfavorable international context. At the time, anti-capitalist movements and parties had suffered severe political, theoretical, and ideological defeats worldwide. The Soviet bloc was about to collapse and the United States was positioned as the sole superpower in a unipolar world. The period was also characterized by the hegemony of neoliberalism and of the ideology of the *end of History*. Almost all Latin American countries had right-wing governments that had implemented the structural adjustment policies of the Washington Consensus and were involved in the global and continental so-called free trade agenda. Socialism had practically disappeared from political debate. China, the main "socialist" country, was rapidly taking steps in a capitalist direction and was becoming the most dynamic center of the global process of capital accumulation. The expressions of a new phase of peoples' struggles on the continent, the indigenous uprising in Ecuador of 1990 and the Zapatista uprising of 1994, were yet to come. As stated before, in Venezuela the left was weak, as were popular organizations and social movements.

The transformations that Chávez imagined were vague and lacking in precedents when he became president. Apart from Chávez's own limited political background, essentially restricted to activities within the armed forces, in that particular historical and regional context it was difficult to envision whether a viable alternative to the neoliberal order could be thought of as socialist, or as a less radical transformation along the lines of a social democratic welfare state. Chávez said at the time that the two major political systems of the 20th century, liberal capitalism and socialism, had failed.[4] He argued for the construction of an alternative society deeply rooted in the cultures and traditions

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4   A book of interviews with Chávez carried out by the Venezuelan historian Agustín Blanco Muñoz (1998) is the most comprehensive presentation of Chávez's political thinking just before he became president.

of the struggles of Latin American peoples. More than a model or a program, what was put forward were a set of value and policy orientations to guide the construction of the new society: the priorities were the "popular" sectors of society, national sovereignty, equality, inclusion, solidarity, overcoming the limitations of representative democracy, the union of the continent's peoples, and the struggle for a multipolar world as opposed to the world shaped by the imperial hegemony of the United States. All this was conceived as a continuation of the epic battles for independence in the early decades of the 19th century and was closely identified with the figure of Simón Bolívar. The category which combined the national and the popular, *the people*, was a key word of the discourse.

THE MAIN MILESTONES OF THE BOLIVARIAN PROCESS

The election of a constitutional assembly to craft a new constitution was the most important short-term proposal formulated by Chávez as a candidate. This became a priority of the new government, and on the day of his inauguration as president, Chávez called for a national referendum to decide whether this constitutional assembly should be elected. The proposal was overwhelmingly approved in a referendum. In a second referendum the new Constitution produced by the constitutional assembly was approved by 72 percent of the voters. This new Constitution was conceived as the main political and legal instrument for the transformative agenda of the new government.

According to its preamble, the aims of this Constitution are: ...the supreme end of reshaping the Republic to establish a democratic, participatory and protagonist, multiethnic and multicultural society in a state of justice, federal and decentralized State that embodies the values of freedom, independence, peace, solidarity, the common good, territorial integrity, co-existence and the rule of law for this and future generations; ensure the right to life, work, culture, education, social justice and equality without any discrimination or subordination; promotes peaceful cooperation among nations and furthers and strengthens Latin American integration in accordance with the principle of non-intervention and self-determination of peoples, the universal and indivisible guarantee of human rights, democratization of international society, nuclear disarmament, ecological equilibrium and environmental goods as the common and inalienable heritage of humanity.

The economic model is defined on the basis of the state playing a strong role. While ensuring private property and private initiatives, the state reserves for itself the petroleum industry and other industrial, agricultural, and service activities considered to be of a strategic nature. From a political point of view, the most significant changes were

the introduction of a multiplicity of mechanisms and modalities of participation.[5] These were conceived as tools to deepen and radicalize democracy in both the political and economic fields, without replacing representative democracy. The existing politico-territorial divisions of states, municipalities, and parishes, as well as the separation of powers characteristic of the liberal tradition, were preserved.

In contrast with what was happening on the rest of the continent, economic, social, and cultural rights were not only ratified, but significantly expanded in the new Constitution. Access to free and universal education, health services, and social security were established as state responsibilities. An ample range of indigenous peoples' rights was recognized, including their territorial rights. As a reflection of the decisive role of Hugo Chávez in this process, the country's name was changed to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the presidential term was extended to six years, and an immediate presidential reelection was introduced.

An important moment of rupture carried out by the Chávez government came two years after the adoption of the Constitution when, on the basis of special powers that had been granted by the National Assembly through an Enabling Law, the President enacted 49 new laws in 2001. The aim of these laws was the democratization of ownership and production; a reorientation of public sector financial instruments to promote small and medium-size enterprises; the creation of a micro-credit system; the promotion of alternative forms of property, and the creation of cooperatives. There were three particularly controversial laws concerning the eradication of large rural estates, against trawling, and increased state control over the oil industry.

This set of laws was seen by the business community and the political opposition as an attack on private property, with many arguing that these laws confirmed the statist or communist political character of the government project. A national business strike in protest at these laws in December 2001 marked the beginning of a phase of intense confrontation between the government and an opposition willing to use all the means at its disposal to overthrow it. In April 2002 a *coup d'état* toppled the government for a couple of days. This US backed coup finally failed due to extraordinary popular mobilization and divisions within the armed forces. Those directly involved in the coup included the opposition parties, the main business associations, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and a sector of the armed forces. The private media played a leading role.

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5   According to Article 70 of the Constitution: "Participation and involvement of people in the exercise of their sovereignty in political affairs can be manifested by: voting to fill public offices, referendum, consultation of public opinion, mandate revocation, legislative, constitutional and constituent initiatives, town meetings and forums and citizen assemblies whose decisions shall be binding among others; and in social and economic affairs: citizen service organs, self-management, co-management, cooperatives in all forms, including those of a financial nature, savings funds, community enterprises, and other forms of association guided by the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity. The law shall establish conditions for the effective functioning of the means of participation provided for under the present article."

Between the final months of 2002 and early 2003 a nationwide oil strike/sabotage campaign and a business lockout were carried out with the express purpose of over-throwing the government. With no gasoline and limited means of transport for people and goods, and with no gas for domestic consumption, the country was semi-paralyzed for more than two months. The gross domestic product collapsed by 17 percent that year. And yet it was also a period of intense spontaneous organization and mobilization. The government only managed to survive this new overthrow attempt as a result of very high levels of active participation among the popular sectors. In 2004 a presidential recall referendum was carried out. Chávez came out of this referendum with increased legitimacy. He was ratified in office with the support of 59.1 percent of voters. A land-mark of extraordinary consequences occurred in January 2005 when, at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Chávez declared the Bolivarian process to be socialist.[6]

In 2013, the country entered a profound political, economic, and ethical crisis. Almost simultaneously, the two main pillars on which the Bolivarian process had become highly dependent – the charismatic leadership of Chávez and high oil prices – were no longer present. Chávez died in March 2013.

April 2013, Plaza Diego Ibarra

World oil market prices started to drop in mid-2014. In the presidential elections held shortly after the death of Chávez, Nicolas Maduro was elected with a margin of just 1.5 percent of votes over Henrique Capriles, the opposition's candidate. In December 2015,

6   This critical issue will be analyzed towards the end of this chapter.

the opposition overwhelmingly won the parliamentary elections, achieving a two-third majority in the National Assembly.

Between 2014 and 2016 there was a sustained drop in the country's GDP. Inflation soared to become the highest on the planet. Shortages of food and medicines, the decline of wages, growing insecurity, and the deterioration of public services all led to an accelerated reversal of the population's improved standard of living that had been achieved in the previous decade. Massive levels of corruption became more visible. All this led to a growing rejection of the Maduro government. Faced with this fading popular support and the electoral advances of the opposition, the government was confronted, in schematic terms, with two basic options. The first was to recognize the need for a profound self-critical analysis of government policies with the purpose of trying to figure out the root causes of its rapidly increasing unpopularity. This would have inevitably highlighted issues such as rampant corruption and inefficiency, the impossibility of continuing with the unsustainable highly subsidized exchange rate that was distorting the economy, as well as the need to re-engage with popular organizations in order to confront the economic crisis.

However, the Maduro government clearly decided for another option. It seems to have assumed that if it wanted to remain in power it could no longer act within the limits set by the Constitution and could no longer count on favorable electoral results. Thus, instead of dealing with the basic issues that were creating these high levels of discontent, it has taken an increasingly authoritarian route: the Constitution is systematically breached; the National Assembly has been declared to be in rebellion against the constitutional order, and since then, for all practical purposes, ignored, and its constitutional powers taken over by the Executive and the Supreme Court of Justice. A constitutionally guaranteed presidential recall referendum was cancelled and the governor elections, which should have been held in December 2016, were indefinitely postponed. Police and military repression has dramatically increased. President Maduro has ruled since February 2016 by means of a *State of Exception and Economic Emergency* on terms that clearly violate the Constitution. He thus governs by decree, and many constitutional rights can be suspended.

The tendency for left-wing or transformative experiences to become associated with authoritarianism can have severe and long-lasting consequences far beyond Venezuela. It serves to undermine support for anti-capitalist projects around the world. This is particularly so as a consequence of the widespread expectations that the Bolivarian Revolution had created.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF
THE BOLIVARIAN PROCESS

It is not the aim of this work to provide a comprehensive analysis of the achievements of the Bolivarian process. However, a review, albeit cursory, of some the achievements of this process is essential to an initial understanding of the contradictions that have characterized this experience. In the first decade of the Bolivarian government there were high levels of politicization, significant changes to popular political culture and its organizational fabric, as well as significant improvements in the standards of living of the previously excluded popular sectors of the population. An extensive sense of dignity and inclusion and of the capacity to have a say over both one's own life and the fate of the country was generated.

Through multiple social policies (*the missions*) aimed at different segments of the population, levels of poverty and extreme poverty were significantly reduced. According to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the country became, along with Uruguay, one of the two least unequal countries in Latin America (CEPAL, 2013: p. 79). The population achieved better levels of nutrition (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura, 2013), although this was not as a consequence of the country having achieved food sovereignty, but rather of its capacity to import food. Effective literacy programs were established. With Cuban support, the *Barrio Adentro* mission provided urban and rural primary health care services to previously excluded sectors of the population across the country. There was a massive expansion of the public pension scheme, incorporating millions of seniors. There was also an extraordinary expansion of free public university enrollment. An ambitious public housing program was set up. Levels of unemployment significantly decreased and informal employment declined from 51 percent in the first half of 1999 to 41 percent in the first half of 2014 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, n.d.). It has been estimated that the monetary resources devoted to social investments between 1999 and 2013 amounted to a total of about 650 billion US dollars (Giordani, 2014). According to the UNDP, the Human Development Index of the country rose from 0.662 in 2000 to 0.748 in 2012, from "medium" human development, to "high" human development (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2014).

Equally important was the impact of the Venezuelan experience – particularly the constituent process – in the so-called progressive or leftist displacements that occurred in Latin America in the first decade of this century. The Chávez government took the initiative by promoting several regional integration and solidarity organizations (UNASUR, CELAC, Petrocaribe, and ALBA) that have contributed to strengthening regional autonomy, thus limiting the historical dependence that the region has had on the United States. Venezuela played a critical role in the defeat of the Free Trade Area of

the Americas (FTAA) which would have meant the establishment of a neoliberal constitution for the entire continent. When Venezuela started to confront this imperial project, every single government in the Americas, in spite of their many differences on particular issues, agreed on the benefits of negotiating and signing this agreement.

As a result of these policies the Bolivarian government was confronted, from the very beginning, with continued attacks by the United States government. US attempts to undermine or overthrow the Venezuelan government have taken many forms, such as financial and political backing for the right-wing opposition, support for the 2002 *coup d'état*, and systematic attempts to isolate the country. More recently, just before leaving office, Barak Obama renewed an Executive Order he had previously signed that declared that Venezuela represented an "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States" (The White House, 2017).

In a Posture Statement presented to the Senate Armed Forces Committee in April 2017, Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, head of the United States Southern Command, affirmed that: ...Venezuela faces significant instability in the coming year due to widespread food, and medicine shortages; continued political uncertainty; and a worsening economic situation. The growing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela could eventually compel a regional response. (United States Southern Command, 2017)

In August 2017, Donald Trump threatened Venezuela with a United States military intervention: *We have many options for Venezuela and by the way, I'm not going to rule out a military option. We have many options for Venezuela, this is our neighbor (…) We're all over the world and we have troops all over the world in places that are very very far away, Venezuela is not very far away and the people are suffering and dying. We have many options for Venezuela including a possible military option if necessary.* (Jacobs, 2017)

TENSIONS, CONTRADICTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS OF THE BOLIVARIAN PROCESS

The deep political, economic, and ethical crisis that began in 2013 was, as stated above, precipitated by the death of Chávez and the collapse of oil prices. However, to attempt a more comprehensive assessment of the Bolivarian experience from 1998 to the present, and to draw lessons from this rich historical experience that generated so many expectations both inside and outside Venezuela, and explore why it basically failed as an alternative to capitalism and civilization in crisis, it is essential to go more deeply into other more basic structural and political issues. Some of these are of a historical-structural nature pertaining to the reality of a country with an economy, political system, and hegemonic cultural patterns that for over a century have been based on expansive state-controlled oil revenues. Others, of a more political and ideological nature, are

bound up with the contents and basic (changing) orientations of the Bolivarian project. These are factors that have had a crucial impact on the shape this process has taken.

DEEPENING THE OIL RENTIER MODEL: THE CONTINUED ASSAULT ON NATURE

As has been the case in the experience of all countries with so-called progressive governments in South America, during the Bolivarian process the predatory extractive development model was not questioned beyond the discursive sphere. Given the rise in demand for and prices of commodities in the first decade of the century, for the Venezuelan government, as for other governments in the region, the expansion of the colonial model of integration into the international division of labor and nature represented the easiest and most immediate option for obtaining the resources required to implement redistributive social policies and for preserving the electoral support that would give permanence to the government over time. By prioritizing short-term political advantage, the government consolidated the inherited primary export model.

The extraordinary expansion of social spending was made possible by a radical reorientation in the use of the country's oil rent, without even the slightest adjustment of the country's productive structure. Many initiatives and modalities of Latin American solidarity such as Petrocaribe were possible thanks to this abundant income. Throughout the years of the Bolivarian government, dependence on oil exports increased. The participation of oil in the total value of exports rose from 68.7 percent in 1998 to 96 percent by the time of the onset of the current crisis in 2013 (Banco Central de Venezuela, n.d.(b)).[7] In absolute terms, there has been a reduction in the value of non-oil exports and private exports (Banco Central de Venezuela, n.d. (b)). The industrial sector's contribution to the GDP fell from 17 percent in 2000 to 13 percent in 2013 (Banco Central de Venezuela, n.d. (c)).

With its declared aims of limiting capital flight and curbing inflation, the government sustained a foreign exchange control mechanism with an extraordinarily overvalued currency; this accentuated the so-called *Dutch disease* that has characterized the Venezuelan economy for many decades. For most sectors of the economy it is cheaper to import than to produce domestically. Apart from oil, few goods can be produced at competitive enough prices. Social policy and successive wage increases markedly increased the purchasing power of the population but this increase in demand was not accompanied by a commensurate increase in domestic production. The gaps had to be covered by increased imports. These could only be financed with income from oil exports.

In the 1970s, in another cycle of abundance due to high oil prices during the first government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, the notion that Venezuela was a rich country was widely

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7   This was only partially due to the increase in oil prices.

accepted as common sense. The official discourse of those years called it the *Great Venezuela*. Popular discourse referred to *Saudi Venezuela*. This imaginary of great abundance was repeated during the government of Hugo Chávez, this time under the name of Venezuela: *a Global Energy Power*.

With regard to climate change and the responsibilities of the country with the planet's largest oil reserves, the distance between the discourse and the policies actually carried out could not be greater. In the negotiations during the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, representatives of Venezuela presented radical speeches blaming capitalism and the industrialized countries of the North for the high levels of fossil fuel consumption that threaten life on the planet. However, it has been government policy to maximize oil extraction. The clearest example of this profound contradiction is found in the so-called *Plan de la Patria,* the last government program presented by Chávez for the presidential elections of 2012. This program, subsequently approved by the National Assembly as the country's development plan, is organized around five major objectives. Goal number five is to preserve life on the planet and save the human species. However, the target of goal number three is to consolidate the role of Venezuela as a *Global Energy Power*. To that end, according to this plan, oil production was to be doubled from three million to six million barrels per day between 2013 and 2019 (Asamblea Nacional, 2013). Fortunately, mainly due to inefficiency, lack of investment, and corruption in the state oil company PDVSA, these efforts have failed. Oil production in April 2017 was not much over two million barrels per day.

The sale of gasoline and other fossil fuels at heavily subsidized prices (it is one of the few items whose price has not been impacted by inflation) not only encourages massive wasteful consumption, but has blocked any possibility of developing alternative energies.

Faced with the collapse of oil prices, the government's response has not been to open a national debate on alternatives to the extractive rentier policies of development, in order to comply, for example, with the constitutional mandate in relation to food security.[8] In an attempt to deal with severe nutritional deficiency and the health crisis facing the population, and the lack of sufficient foreign reserves to finance the required imports, it chooses to further deepen the predatory extractive model, now through mining. On February 24, 2016 President Nicolás Maduro issued a decree creating the National Strategic Development Zone "Arco Minero del Orinoco" (the Orinoco Mining Arch) by which 112,000 square kilometers,

8   Article 305: "The State shall promote sustainable agriculture as the strategic basis for overall rural development, and consequently shall guarantee the population a secure food supply, defined as the sufficient and stable availability of food within the national sphere and timely and uninterrupted access to the same for consumers. A secure food supply must be achieved by developing and prioritizing internal agricultural and livestock production, understood as production deriving from the activities of agriculture, livestock, fishing and aquiculture. Food production is in the national interest and is fundamental to the economic and social development of the Nation. To this end, the State shall promulgate such financial, commercial, technological transfer, land tenancy, infrastructure, manpower training and other measures as may be necessary to achieve strategic levels of self-sufficiency. In addition, it shall promote actions in the national and international economic context to compensate for the disadvantages inherent to agricultural activity."

Oil Slick, Venezuela

12 percent of national territory, was opened up to mining.[9] Some 150 transnational mining corporations from around the world were invited to participate. The armed forces have been assigned a central role in this project, both in preventing and repressing any form of resistance or opposition to this megaproject, and in the operation of newly created military-owned mining companies. This is a territory inhabited by several indigenous peoples, a territory belonging to the Amazon forest that plays a vital role in regulating climate regimes on the planet; an area of extraordinary biodiversity, it contains the main sources of water in Venezuela. The hydroelectric dams that supply 70 percent of the electricity consumed in the country are located within the boundaries of the Arco Minero. All this is threatened by the large-scale open-pit mining projects that are planned for this area. This decision, in which the future of the country is at stake, was made by the President of the Republic, in the total absence of any public debate, without consulting the National Assembly, and in violation of both the Constitution and several laws concerning the rights of indigenous peoples as well as environmental and labor rights.

This is an area that has been undergoing a process of large-scale socio-environmental devastation as a result of illegal gold mining, which has expanded significantly over the past two decades. There are tens of thousands of miners often controlled by armed gangs. Violence rules. Apart from severe environmental destruction, there is widespread drug trafficking and prostitution. Miserable and unhealthy working conditions prevail. All this happens not only with the complicity, but also with the direct participa-

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9   The Arco Minero del Orinoco will operate as a *Special Economic Zone*, which, as has been the case in China and Viet Nam, seeks to attract foreign investment through financial and fiscal incentives, and the non-application of some national environmental and labor laws.

tion, of some of the regional authorities and military security bodies that are supposedly responsible for preventing these illegal activities. With the opening of this territory to large-scale open-pit mining this ongoing catastrophe can only increase. This constitutes, in short, a structural deepening of the logic of the commodification of nature that has been hegemonic in Venezuelan society for a century.

Once again priority has been given to maximizing short-term state income through extractive activities. The most important public policies have been of a distributive character that has failed to question the structural base of the Venezuelan economy. As a consequence, in spite of many discourses to the contrary highlighting, for example, the importance of dialogues of wisdoms (*diálogos de saberes*), the main content of the inherited technological patterns has not, in practical terms, been challenged.

The most significant technological transformation of the last decade and a half is not unique to Venezuela: namely, the rapid expansion of the use of cell phones and social media. These played a critical role in the organization of popular resistance against the right-wing coup of April 2002, and fifteen years later they are playing an equally important role in the organization/coordination of the massive rallies against the Maduro government.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE STATE

In the main political debates of the Bolivarian process there has been a severe lack of theoretical debate that incorporates a critical evaluation of the socialist experiences of the last century with regard to questions such as what a post-capitalist society in this century could be or what could or should be the relations between state, market, and organized sectors of society. An informed and thoughtful study and debate on the post-capitalist potentialities and limitations of current transformations underway in China, Viet Nam, and Cuba have also been lacking. This of course is not a specifically Venezuelan problem; it is an expression of the current situation of the left throughout the world. Worldwide, the left has demonstrated its impotence and failure to respond credibly to the current global crisis of capitalism and the way in which this crisis has been harnessed by the representatives of global capital to advance further restrictions on democracy and an even greater concentration of power and wealth.

In the absence of more systematic and strategic debates about post-capitalist alternatives, however, two types of proposals have been dominant. The first and the most widespread has been the automatic identification of socialism with statism (state-ownership and/or state control).[10] Each time a private company is nationalized, it is immediately renamed as a "socialist enterprise." The second is the identification of post-capitalism with a *communal state,* an issue that will be dealt with further below in this text.

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10   Between the first half of 1999 and the first half of 2014, the participation of the public sector in total employment increased from 15.5 percent to 20.7 percent (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, n.d.).

In the Bolivarian political project, the state was conceived as the main agent or subject of social transformation. Historical and institutional legacies of a state-centric logic which has characterized most of Latin America throughout its history have undergirded this process. In Venezuela, oil has accentuated this logic to exceptional extremes. The whole of society has been organized around the state. The political system and parties have revolved around the struggles for the appropriation of parts of the oil rent by different sectors of society. Private accumulation of capital and the emergence of business sectors have been directly fueled by public financing, subsidies, tariff protections, and the corrupt privatization of the public sphere. In the years of the Bolivarian process this state-centric logic became more deeply entrenched.

The 1999 Constitution expands the scope of the state, mainly through its executive branch, both in the productive field and as guarantor of the social and economic rights of the population, especially those most in need. This extension of the state's areas of competence also includes, among other things, control over trade union and student elections, the elections of the authorities of the autonomous universities, and the power to decide which political parties can be recognized.[11] To the extent that oil income was embraced as the tool for promoting the desired changes, there has been an increased centralization of the control of this revenue by the executive branch of government.

Besides the three traditional liberal branches of government (Executive, Judiciary, and Legislative), the 1999 Constitution created two additional autonomous branches of government: the Electoral Power, and the Citizen's Power. This, however, did not alter the overall preponderance of the executive branch of government that has historically characterized the country's political system. During the Bolivarian process, the other branches of government were completely subservient to the Executive. When the opposition won a majority in the National Assembly, the Assembly was declared to be in rebellion and stripped of all its functions. On several occasions when opposition parties won some municipal or state elections, the Executive created new parallel ad hoc structures to undermine and under-finance these opposition governments.[12]

The identification of socialism with state control has had devastating consequences for the productive apparatus of the country as it has created conditions that impede the effec-

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11   The elections of one of the biggest trade unions in the country, in the SIDOR steel plant, have been indefinitely postponed because the government is aware of the fact that it would lose them if they were carried out. The National Electoral Council has refused to register the leftist political organization *Marea Socialista* as a political party, absurdly claiming that its name sounds more like a slogan than a name for a political party.

12   When opposition candidate Antonio Ledezma won the elections to become the Metropolitan Mayor of Caracas in 2008, the National Assembly passed a law creating the Capital District, directly dependent on the Executive. Many of the functions and financing of the Metropolitan Mayor were transferred to the new government-controlled structure. When one of the main leaders of the opposition, Henrique Capriles, was re-elected as governor of the state of Miranda in 2012, the National Assembly created CorpoMiranda, a parallel central-government-controlled institution with a budget that was eventually larger than that of the governor's office.

tive operation of both the public and the private sectors. The state has lacked the capacity to manage the wide range of companies that have been nationalized. Most of the industrial and agricultural enterprises that have been nationalized are less efficiently managed and have reduced outputs. This has been the result of bureaucratism, labor disputes, the sale of products at prices that do not cover production costs, as well as corruption.[13] There has also been a lack of new investment, not only in maintenance but also in the technological upgrading of the plants. In some cases, such as in steel and aluminum production, the state-owned plants are exhibiting extraordinary levels of deterioration and disuse.[14] Consequently, a high proportion of these companies is generating operational losses and survives only thanks to the injection of resources from oil revenues.

This state-centered logic was, from the very beginning, accompanied by the recognition of the need to profoundly modify the "inherited" or capitalist state in order to carry out the process of transformation. The notion of the transition was framed in terms of the old state that refuses to die, and the new state that has still not been born. The way this challenge has been dealt with has varied at different moments of the Bolivarian process. When the first large-scale social programs or *misiones* were created (the Cuban-backed primary health mission *Barrio Adentro*, the first education programs, etc.) there was a recognition of the need to overcome bureaucratic obstacles in order to bring the government closer to the people. Thus, parallel, more informal structures were created to implement the most critical social programs. This was also a reaction to the fact that many of these programs were delayed or even sabotaged by those people in office who were opposed to the government. These were seen as transitional or even emergency structures, not necessarily as the model of the new state in strategic terms. On the downside, these structures increased public employment, and contributed to turning the state into an even more cumbersome and less transparent structure.

Over time, the strategic conception of the alternative state has been framed in terms of a *Communal State*. This has been conceived as a decentralized state, controlled directly by the population at the community level, that is, as part of a transition to forms of democratic self-governance from below. However, this has been a source of major tensions and contradictions as this mode of democratic, communal self-government is hardly compatible with the vertical control from above and vanguardism of the ideas and practices that have prevailed in the Bolivarian process.

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13   When he announced his decision to intervene in the area of the state oil company in charge of fuel distribution, PDVSA, President Nicolás Maduro said: "There are very serious indications of the connection of mafia groups with some instances of state companies, we are going to pursue them and we will punish them with twice the severity with which they are punished normally." (Aporrea, 2014)

14   According to the last official data provided by the Venezuelan Central Bank, basic steel production in 2011 was only 74.9 percent of the production level of 1997. In the case of aluminum, there was an even more significant decrease. The level of production in 2011 was only 52.3 percent of production levels in 1997 (Banco Central de Venezuela, n.d. (a)).

TENSIONS IN POPULAR ORGANIZATIONS PROMOTED BY THE STATE

Venezuela before the Bolivarian process was characterized as a society with a weak social fabric due mainly to the strong presence of the state and the overwhelming presence of political parties in all spheres of society. Political parties operated as the main agents for channeling the aspirations and demands of society. Political parties were the main actors in trade unions, professional associations, and student, local, and cultural organizations. There was limited space for the existence of autonomous social organizations outside the state/party network.

With the beginning of the Chávez government, the country saw the emergence of highly dynamic participatory and organizational processes involving millions of people: Technical Water Tables, Community Water Councils (*Mesas Técnicas de Agua* y *Consejos Comunitarios de Agua*), Health Committees, Urban Land Committees, and, later, Communal Councils, and Communes. This organizational dynamic was the result of both the radical politicization that was happening in Venezuelan society and of public policies aimed at promoting these processes. Some of the social policies (*misiones*) were conceptualized in such a way that popular grassroots organizations were necessarily part of their implementation. All this marks a deep contrast with the experiences of Ecuador and Bolivia where government policies led to the division and weakening of pre-existing popular organizations.

The large-scale public promotion and financing of grassroots organizations, especially the Communal Councils and Communes, have produced contradictory results. On the one hand this has led to extraordinary levels of popular organization, unprecedented in Venezuelan history. Massive amounts of public resources were transferred to communities to address their most immediate problems: repairs to sidewalks, stairways, housing, cultural and sports centers, repairs to schools, and, in some cases, productive activities. This created a dynamic by which the self-identity and social fabric of local communities was strengthened. Social and political participation increased significantly.

However, at the same time the historical logic of a statist centralized rentier model was reaffirmed, since most of these new organizations tended to rely directly on the transfer of resources from some state institution. The consequence of this dependence was a limitation of the potential for the consolidation and autonomy of these community-based local organizations as alternatives to state structures, and as breeding grounds for other cultural and policy possibilities. The multiple forms of social organization cannot exercise control over and influence the orientation of public policy unless they have a significant degree of autonomy. If their functioning is highly dependent on the transfer of resources from state institutions, the democratizing role of these social organizations is severely limited. The deepening of the rentier culture and extractivist economy operated against self-reliance and enhanced a consumerist understanding of life quality. In

addition, the corruption associated with struggles in the distribution of the country's oil rent found its way to the grassroots level of society.

The contradictions between the demands and experiences of autonomy and self-governance vs. state or party controls from above were further enhanced when, in 2005, Chávez announced that the Bolivarian revolution was a socialist revolution. From that time on, vertical state/party control increased significantly. In legal and institutional terms, a whole complex of new laws designed to promote what was called *People's Power* were approved. In 2009 the government even created a Ministry of People's Power for Communes.

However, instead of promoting people power, giving people more autonomy and the capacity to exert control over state institutions, these laws seemed to have been explicitly designed to increase state control over these popular organizations. Instead of increasing transparency as intended in the *Organic Law of Public Controllership*, all levels of public administration became more and more opaque. The laws of the Communal Councils and the Communes specify in great detail the purpose of these organizations, how they should be structured, the specific attributions of each part of the organizations, etc. These detailed legal norms suggest that these organizations are conceived as part of the state structure. This ambiguity is present in the *National Social and Economic Plan 2007-2013* which refers to People's Power both as if it were another branch of government that has to relate to the other branches of government, and something that is external to the state and has to keep an equilibrium with the state.

As a consequence, there was a reduction in the rich diversity of organizational forms that had developed in previous years as there were molded to conform to new standardized one-size-fits-all organizational arrangements. This completed the consolidation of the primacy of the state's normalizing gaze over the multiplicity of social experiments from below. Similarly, given the dominance of a redistributive logic over a productive logic that characterized the policies of the Bolivarian government from the very beginning, clientelism has prevailed in a significant proportion of the state's relations with grassroots organizations. In the transfer of state resources to communities the emphasis has been on solving the immediate problems of the population, rather than on structural changes. This has meant that, especially in urban areas, issues relating to other modes of production and consumption, alternatives to the hegemonic civilization in crisis, have on the whole not been a central part of the experience. The oil development model and its rentier logic have not been questioned because it is precisely the income from this model that has made this kind of relationship between state and popular organizations possible.

Despite the participation of millions of people in these rich, multiple, organizational dynamics, their dependence on state resources made them quite fragile. In a political process that has for years celebrated the value of solidarity and had promoted this rich fabric of multiple forms of popular organization, it was surely to be expected that the

response to the severe economic crisis that began in 2013 would be one of solidarity, of a collective creative nature. On the whole, however, this has not been the case. The reaction to the crisis has been characterized more by pragmatism, individualism, and competition. The significant changes in the popular political culture of previous years, the sense of dignity, the subjectivities characterized by self-confidence and enthusiasm as a result of feeling part of the process of building a better future – with the crisis all of these entered into a retrogressive dynamic that has resulted in the erosion of the social fabric of solidarity and of the ethical values that had previously prevailed. Most of the grassroots organizations established during these years have been weakened both by the lack of state resources on which they have become dependent, and as a consequence of a fading confidence in the government and the country's future. In an extreme case, some of the groups that were created in Caracas in defense of the Bolivarian process, the so-called collectives (*colectivos)*, have become criminal armed groups that control territories and are involved in the trafficking of drugs and food.

Yet despite these multiple difficulties and obstacles, there are, in these times of deep crisis, still many grassroots experiences that were nurtured by the politicization and activism of Venezuelan society over the last few years and have survived as autonomous, creative organizations. Even if they only represent a minority of the vast organizational experience of these years, they are living examples of what is possible today in the struggle for another, better future. Many other popular organizations are still discussing how to continue operating in this new context. Their sustained activities demonstrate that democratic organizations cannot be declared as such from above. Building up such organizations takes time, requires some level of autonomy and more horizontality than has been the case with the organizations promoted by the Venezuelan government.

After almost two decades of the Bolivarian process, the most important and vigorous autonomous popular social organization of the country continues to be *Cecosesola*, a network of cooperatives whose operations are centered in the city of Barquisimeto. This is an extensive network of cooperatives, agricultural production units, health and funeral services, and, especially, food distribution structures that connect producers and consumers. Tens of thousands of people are involved as partners or beneficiaries. Over decades of an ongoing process of self-reflection, debates, and experimentation, *Cecosesola* has established organizational arrangements of a genuinely horizontal democratic nature, with a very limited division of labor. All members are involved in the wide range of responsibilities. All decisions are made in assemblies (Colectivo de autoras y autores de Cecosesola, 2015). There is a profound contrast between this horizontal form of organization, built up over five decades of experimentation, and many of the vertical organizations created by decree by the Bolivarian government.

Despite permanent generic references to "workers" in the Bolivarian discourse, neither workers nor labor unions have played a central role in the popular organizations of these

years. This, as has been noted above, is mainly due to the fact that the Bolivarian process has been characterized more by its distributive policies than by any significant productive transformations. Territorial organizations have by far been more important than work-based organizations. The role of unions has been quite marginal and their participation in the negotiation of salaries and working conditions limited. Wage increases have been granted in most cases by way of unilateral presidential decrees. As a whole, labor unions have not only been severely weakened, but in some cases have come to operate more as corrupt armed mafias than as organizations defending the interests of workers. This has been particularly the case in some construction and mining unions.

THE BLURRING OF BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE PUBLIC/STATE SPHERE AND THE POLITICAL/PARTY SPHERE

Closely associated with the central role of the state in the Bolivarian process, both in economic and political terms, is what has been the systematic blurring of boundaries between the public/state sphere and the partisan/political sphere. The use of public resources for partisan political purposes is not new in Venezuelan political history. However this practice acquires new features when it is supported by an explicit or implicit ideological justification that states that, since this is a Revolution, the use of any means to defeat the enemy is ethically justified. This has severe implications for two closely interrelated themes: democracy and corruption.

This extended fusion between the public/state sphere and the political/partisan sphere became a severe obstacle to the possibility of building a pluralistic democracy, as it was established by the 1999 Constitution. Since its inception, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has used state resources for propaganda, mobilizations, and meetings, despite an explicit constitutional prohibition. Senior officials have repeatedly declared that public employees who do not participate in activities promoted by the PSUV or who support the opposition by signing one of its initiatives would lose their jobs. Expressions of these tensions are the disputes within the trade-union movement which identified with the Bolivarian process, between those who defend the autonomy of trade unions, both in relation to the government and the parties, and those who, on the other hand, argue that since this is a popular government that represents workers' interests, there is no need for autonomy.

Over the last decade the most important grassroots organizations that have been promoted by the government have been the Communal Councils, conceived as the basic organizations for participatory democracy that would, over time, along with the Communes, displace the structures of the existing state (states, municipalities, and parishes). Over the years, debates and highly significant practical confrontations over how these privileged structures of democratic participation should be conceived have taken place. Are these plural spaces open to the whole society, are they public spaces

within which different projects and social and political perspectives can be confronted? Or, on the contrary, are these conceived as Chavista, "revolutionary," or "socialist" political spaces? While Communal Councils have been created in many residential areas where political opposition forces dominate, there are important sectors within the government and the PSUV that have argued that these must be uniquely "Chavista" spaces. This is a fundamental issue with significant implications for the future of democracy in the country. If these, the basic building blocks from which the structures of the new communal state were supposed to emerge, are defined in sectarian and exclusionary ways, if these are restricted to those who share the current political government agenda, this would leave out a significant proportion of the Venezuelan population that has not identified with the government or with socialism. This perspective would deny the possibility that Communal Councils could be part of a process of building a democratic society where *all* citizens could participate.

A more recent example of this fusion between the political/partisan sphere (representing a part of society) and the public/state sphere (which is supposed to represent the whole of society) have been the *Local Committees of Supply and Production* (CLAP), created as a mechanism for distributing basic goods (especially food) when severe shortages prevail. Although it is a public program, funded with state resources, it consists mainly of PSUV structures, such as the Bolivar-Chávez Battle Units (UBCH) and the Frente Francisco de Miranda (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Mujer y la Igualdad de Género, 2016). Under these conditions, it is not surprising that there have been repeated allegations of political discrimination in this food distribution program.

The consequences of this merger between party and state from the point of view of corruption are equally severe. When the barrier between the public/state sphere and partisan politics is blurred in the use of public resources, it leads to the blurring of the boundary between the public and the private. As a result of this there is an increased lack of transparency in public administration, which in turn creates the institutional basis for extraordinarily high levels of corruption.[15]

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15 Corruption on a massive scale has been one of the most severe problems of the Bolivarian process. There has been a serious lack of transparency in government expenditure. Previous procedures for public accountability have been at least partly dismantled, or have been used almost exclusively to target the opposition. The main source of corruption has been associated with the creation of departments for the control of foreign currency exchange in order to limit capital flight from the country. Since demand has always been much higher than the supply provided by the government, parallel (illegal), speculative exchange markets have emerged. This has produced an exponential increase in the value of the bolívar in relation to the US dollar. In August 2017 while the fixed official exchange rate for basic food and medical imports was 10 bolívars per US dollar the parallel exchange rate fluctuated between 10,000 and 18,000 bolívars per US dollar. The office in charge of deciding which requests for subsidized foreign currency would be honored thus holds a tremendous discretionary power. New millionaires were created as a result. According to the ex-president of the Venezuelan Central Bank, Aimeé Betancourt, in 2013 alone some 20 billon US dollars in subsidized currency were supplied by the government to so-called briefcase companies for imports that never took place, an artificial demand not related to productive activities (Aporrea, 2013). This represents huge levels of public/private corruption that, according to some estimates, amounts to as much as 300 billion US dollars over the last ten years.

THE ROLE OF A CHARISMATIC LEADER

The overpowering leadership of Hugo Chávez was, in contradictory terms, both a basic strength of the Bolivarian process, and a source of some of its limitations. Without the charisma, leadership skills, and extraordinary communicative and popular pedagogical gifts that Chávez had, it would hardly have been possible to break the iron cage, the lethargy of a society which, as noted above, was characterized by growing inequalities and exclusions, a political system that had become delegitimized. The popular sectors of society lacked any prospects for a better future. He gave voice and a sense of direction to this enormous discontent and promoted processes of popular participation and organization throughout the country. In this way Chávez acted as a powerful agent or catalyst for social change.
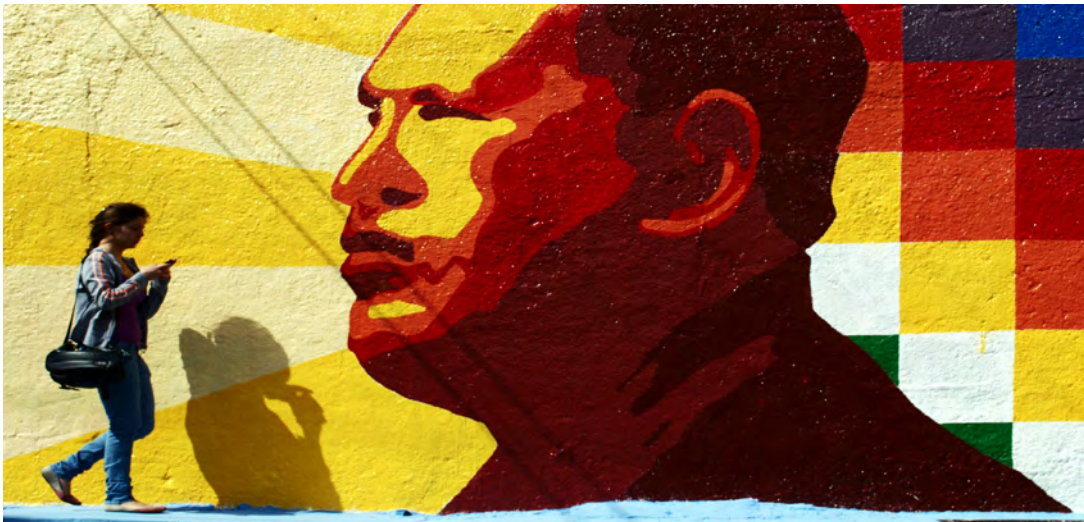
Chávez mural

However, the degree of dependence of the Bolivarian process on one person, the cult of personality, and the high level of concentration of power in his hands, constituted a severe limitation on the dynamics of deepening democracy. This type of overpowering leadership blocks the emergence of alternative leaderships, and is thus an extraordinary source of fragility for the entire political process. The absence of the essential leader, as demonstrated by the death of Chávez, could cause a major crisis.

The consolidation over time of the unquestioned leadership of one person prevents the creation of a democratic culture of debates between different perspectives. People who were close to President Chávez have described how this led to a climate of unconditionality that limited the possibility of debates and confrontations between different ideas.

The leader was well protected from the less favorable aspects of reality. Under these conditions, access to power can easily be equated with access to, and the confidence of, the President. Opportunism easily masquerades as "revolutionary." The indefinite reelection of the President on the basis of a constitutional amendment approved by a national referendum in 2009, made it possible, given the age of Chávez at the time, for the issue of creating relay leaderships to disappear from the horizon.

But even more problematic has been the tension between, on the one hand, the discourse and practice of popular participation, as a condition for the new forms of democracy in which power should reside with the people, and, on the other, the fact that again and again, decisions on fundamental issues for the country's future (the creation of a single party, the need for constitutional reform, financing of major infrastructure projects, international agreements, the creation of new modes of popular organization or social programs) were announced on television without any previous information or public debate once they had been made by the President. The practice of "participatory democracy" has been basically restricted to local issues. Major decisions about the direction of the Bolivarian process were taken unilaterally and announced to the population from above: "I have decided," "I have ordered." At a certain point the tension between these two divergent logics inevitably becomes evident, and this serves to undermine the people's expectations about building a new democratic culture.

This unilateral mode of exercising power has limited the practice of democracy and restricted popular sovereignty. Candidates for the National Assembly or governors were often personally selected by Chávez, sometimes despite the explicit opposition of the Chavista base, as was the case when some of these candidates were rejected because they were known to be inefficient or corrupt.

Another significant consequence of this mode of leadership has been the lack of continuity in the implementation of many government policies. As new situations arose, both Chávez and Maduro repeatedly announced new initiatives and programs, commissions and committees that overlapped or replaced existing programs. This has been accompanied by a constant re-shuffling of ministers and heads of public enterprises and programs. Some of these public functionaries have acted as if they were starting from scratch. When these types of change occurred there was hardly ever any evaluation of the programs that were being implemented, leading to the permanent undermining of ongoing programs and much improvisation.

THE GROWING MILITARIZATION OF THE BOLIVARIAN GOVERNMENT

The Bolivarian process has been characterized by a marked presence of the military and a military culture, both in the state and in the party. Chávez had more trusting relationships

within the military world than in the civilian world. During these years, active or retired military officials have held high public office as ministers, members of the National Assembly, and governors and presidents of many major public enterprises. There is an inevitable tension between the pursuit of democracy in all spheres of society, as enshrined in the Constitution, and the extended presence of a military imaginary and the role that active and retired military officials have played in the Bolivarian process.

The culture of the armed institution is, by its very nature, of vertical obedience and non-deliberative. The presence of the military in all state institutions in recent years has limited the possibility of transparent and democratic governance. What happens within military institutions, their *esprit de corps* and informal networks of loyalties that have been developed over time, are not transparent to the rest of society. Among the many allegations of massive levels of corruption that have been made over the last years, a large proportion have referred to military officials who have held positions of responsibility in the institutions charged with the allocation of subsidized foreign currency, ports, food distribution, border surveillance, and control of illegal gold mining – precisely the areas where corruption has been more prevalent.

Equally problematic has been the transferal of war-like imaginaries to political life, imbuing it with oft-repeated references to conflicts and battles. The aim of war is the extermination of the other, seen as the enemy. This is unpropitious for the emergence of a democratic political culture. The conception of politics as a confrontation between friend and enemy has informed much of the political imaginary of Chavismo. Many of the political and organizational forms that have been created over the years have clear military roots. Election campaigns for the ratification of Chávez in the recall referendum of 2004, and the reelection of the following year, were referred to as "Battles of Santa Inés I" and "Santa Inés II." The basic units of the PSUV are called battalions. In 2007 a new motto was created for the National Armed Forces: "Fatherland, socialism or death."

The government of Nicolás Maduro has accelerated the process of militarization in the country. He has continued to grant additional powers and privileges to the armed forces. Among other things, there has been an increased military presence at all levels of government. In February 2017, 34 percent of the members of President Maduro's cabinet were active or retired military officials. This included the Minister of the Presidency; the Minister of Internal Affairs; the Minister of Justice and Peace; the Minister of Defense; the Minister of Agriculture and Lands; the Minister of Food; the Minister of Public Works, and the Minister of Ecosocialism and Water (Asociación Civil Control Ciudadano, 2017). The Ministry of Defense and all its agencies have been granted full administrative and operational autonomy, and its supervision by the General Controller of the Republic, enshrined in the Constitution, has been suspended (Aporrea, 2017). New business enterprises under the ownership and control of the armed forces have been created (El Nacional, 2016).

OVERCOMING PATRIARCHY?

As with other aspects of the Bolivarian process, the issues relating to the confrontation with patriarchy have been crossed by major tensions and contradictions. There have been some significant partial successes. Important anti-patriarchal advances were made in the constitutional and legal realms in critical areas like women's participation in the public sphere, protection from violence, and the promotion of women's health and reproductive rights. This section highlights the conceptual notions that relate to overcoming patriarchy included in the political program for transforming society. Yet more research needs to be done in order to evaluate whether substantial changes have occurred as a result.

The Constitution of 1999 not only establishes full equality between men and women in all spheres of public and private life, but also states that the law shall guarantee legal and administrative conditions such as to make equality before the law real and effective; shall adopt affirmative measures for the benefit of any group that is discriminated against, marginalized or vulnerable... (Article 21); equality and equity between men and women at work are guaranteed and the value of household work is recognized. (Article 88)

On motherhood and sexual and reproductive rights: Article 76: Motherhood and fatherhood are fully protected, whatever the marital status of the mother or father. Couples have the right to decide freely and responsibly how many children they wish to conceive, and are entitled to access to the information and means necessary to guarantee the exercise of this right. The State guarantees overall assistance and protection for motherhood, in general, from the moment of conception, throughout pregnancy, delivery and the puerperal period, and guarantees full family planning services based on ethical and scientific values.

Article 77: Marriage, which is based on free consent and absolute equality of rights and obligations of the spouses, is protected. A stable de facto union between a man and a woman which meets the requirements established by law shall have the same effects as marriage.

Throughout the text of the Constitution, explicitly non-gendered language is used.[16] In 2007 the *Organic Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence* was approved. This is a comprehensive legal instrument for the protection of the rights of women, especially, but not only, relating to violence.

Regarding gender parity, in 2000, the National Electoral Council (CNE) decided not to apply the electoral law of 1998 according to which parties should nominate at least 30

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16   In Spanish, as in other languages, many words are gendered: "ciudadano," "president," "juez," the masculine variant of citizen, president, and judge are usually used to refer both to male and female citizens, presidents, and judges. To counter this gender bias which suggests, for example, that to be a president you have to be male, both the masculine and the feminine forms are used throughout the Constitution: "ciudadano o ciudadana," "presidente o presidenta," "juez o jueza."

percent of women as candidates for public office. This requirement was considered to be contrary to the principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution. Later, in 2005 and 2008, the CNE issued two obligatory resolutions on quotas for women's participation. But these resolutions had limited impact, either because that same institution accepted nominations submitted by parties that did not comply with these standards and no penalty was established for noncompliance, or because in many cases women were on the lists as alternate candidates. Neither the government parties nor the opposition parties complied (Archenti & Tula, 2013; García Prince, 2012). These standards were not enforced in subsequent elections. In the *Organic Law of Electoral Processes* of 2009, currently in force, there is no reference to the issue of gender parity. However, in recent years there has been a significant increase in the proportion of women participating in legislative and municipal assemblies (Teresa García & Valdivieso, 2009).

In the multiple forms of popular grassroots organization that have emerged during the years of the Bolivarian government, the participation of women has been very prominent; in many cases they have been in the majority. However, in these grassroots organizations the incorporation of critical gender issues has been limited (Teresa García & Valdivieso, 2009: p. 145).

In high-level public administration there has been a significant increase in the participation of women. At a certain moment four of the five existing state powers were headed by women (Parliament, the Judiciary, the Electoral Power, and Citizen's Power). The Presidency was the only exception. However, "the participation of women is disproportionately concentrated in public administration departments linked to social areas; on the other hand they are still under represented in areas that have been traditionally considered as the most important" (Madriz Sotillo , 2012).

It is in education that there have been the most notable changes in the participation of women in recent years. There has been a marked difference in favor of women in the overall expansion of educational enrollment. Between 1999 and 2015 the percentage of the population who were students aged 15 or over was 10 percent. By 2015 it had increased to 12 percent. Among women in that time it went from 11.2 percent to 19 percent. In 1999, 30 percent of the population aged between 15 and 24 years was studying, while by the first half of 2015 the figure had risen to 45.3 percent (41.1 percent of men and 49.7 percent of women). For all levels of education, there are more women studying than men. The participation of women in the labor market has, however, remained virtually unchanged: 49.7 percent in 1999 and 50.3 percent in 2015 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2016).

The Bolivarian government's social policies regarding women have been characterized predominantly, like other social policies of these years, by its redistributionist and paternalistic character. These policies have been aimed at the most immediate needs

of women of the popular sectors, and focused on activities in their local communities, usually related to issues of care, which are seen as women's responsibility. This could reinforce the existing gender division of labor. An indication of this is the fact that "housework" remains an almost exclusively female activity; the proportion of women engaged in this activity decreased from 35.1 percent in 1999 to 28.5 percent in 2015, but 98.1 percent of all the people who claim to engage in household chores are women (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2016).

As Anaís López (2015) says: *The efforts of the Venezuelan State to redistribute oil income based on social programs have put women in the position of being targeted at the same time with gender policies and social policies. The result is that in terms of indicators of inclusion their situation has improved, while in terms of the transformation of gender relations not much has been achieved.*

In Venezuela, the experience of creating a common agenda or platform for women who were members of different political parties goes back several decades prior to Chávez's election (Expanded Women's Movement) (Teresa García & Valdivieso, 2009). During the Bolivarian process political polarization has been so intense that the possibility of joint efforts such as this has become more difficult. Nonetheless, for some specific initiatives and specific issues it has been possible to retain a certain degree of unity. This has not, however, eliminated the subordination of women's agendas to the agendas of political parties. The clearest example of this is the fact that despite the significant increase in the participation of women in the public sphere, the patriarchal conceptions and practices of the Bolivarian government's male political leadership have prevented the possibility of progress in women's demand for sovereignty over their own bodies, particularly in relation to abortion rights. Although abortions are not actively criminalized, low-income women still have abortions in precarious conditions that lead to many deaths. Adolescent pregnancy rates are very high: "*The birth rate for ages 15 to 19 is 101 per 1,000 women, as compared to 73 per 1,000, the average for Latin America and the Caribbean.*" (United Nations Population Fund , 2014)

The political program of the Bolivarian process has addressed important aspects of the subordination of women. However, in broad cultural terms, looking to the future, the confrontation with patriarchy faces serious challenges posed by a political culture that celebrates strong male leaderships, the centrality of predominantly male military institutions, as well as the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

PLURINATIONALITY AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

As noted above, the Constitution defines Venezuela as a multiethnic and multicultural country. In what is perhaps the most radical rupture with the country's history, the Constitution contains an entire chapter devoted to a broad range of guarantees of the rights of indigenous peoples.[17]

These rights are summarized in Article 119 as follows: The State recognizes the existence of indigenous peoples and communities, their social, political and economic organizations, their cultures, customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy and which are necessary to develop and guarantee their way of life. It will be up to the National Executive, with the participation of indigenous peoples, to demarcate and guarantee the right to collective ownership of their lands, which are inalienable, indefeasible, and nontransferable, in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution and the law.

For the first time in the country, a Ministry of Indigenous Peoples was created and, to date, all its principal officials have been indigenous. The Ministry has had a significant budget that has enabled the state to reach areas of the country occupied by indigenous peoples who historically have been outside the scope of public policies. Houses, health centers, and schools have been built and some productive activities supported.

However, taken as a whole, these policies, far from strengthening the indigenous world, their cultures, and their organizations, have actually weakened them. As has been the case in Ecuador, regardless of the content of some public speeches, indigenous people have been seen as poor, as lacking, as in need of assistance from the state. From this perspective it should not come as a surprise that most of the government's policies in relation to indigenous people can rightly be characterized as colonial policies. This is, for example, the case with the creation of the Indigenous Communal Councils. Ignoring existing ancestral organizational forms and the existence of radically different cultures and traditions, which are supposed to be fully protected by the Constitution, the state has promoted the organization of indigenous communities and peoples in the same standardized organizational model that has been created in the rest of the country. To have access to public resources indigenous communities must organize themselves into Indigenous Communal Councils. This undermining of pre-existing forms of organization and patterns of authority has generated divisions and conflicts within indigenous communities.

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17   These rights were not won through any significant capacity for mobilization and struggle within Venezuelan indigenous peoples at the time of the constituent debate. The wide range of rights included in the Constitution was a result of the incorporation of a large portion of the struggle's agenda that had been articulated by indigenous organizations across the continent in previous decades. This partly explains why indigenous people during the Bolivarian Revolution have been unable to defend these rights.

The rights of indigenous peoples in the Constitution are built on the assumed recognition of their territories. These were called *habitats* to avoid hurting nationalistic sensibilities especially among the military. These are rights that relate primarily to indigenous peoples in their territory. To this end, one of the transitional provisions of the Constitution states that this territorial recognition and demarcation should be carried out within two years. However, seventeen years on, some communities have been given haciendas in a land-reform mode. Not a single indigenous territory has been recognized and demarcated. Consequently, virtually all the rights guaranteed in the Constitution remain unheeded. The right of indigenous peoples to preserve "their social, political and economic organizations, their cultures, customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy and which are necessary to develop and guarantee their way of life" depends on the recognition of a territory in which they can carry out these activities. The same goes for the "right to maintain and develop their ethnic and cultural identity, worldview, values, spirituality, and sacred places of worship" (Article 121); the "right to maintain and promote their own economic practices based on reciprocity, solidarity and exchange [as well as] their traditional productive activities(…)" (Article 123); and the right to prior consultation regarding the "use of natural resources in indigenous habitats by the State" (Article 120). Since the recognition and demarcation of these territories has not been carried out, the state has ignored everything related to prior informed consultation.

Indigenous woman of the Wayuu community

It is the same situation with regards to indigenous peoples' right to apply their own norms of justice: "The legitimate authorities of indigenous peoples in their habitat may

apply instances of justice based on their ancestral traditions and only affecting their members..." (Article 260). If there are no territories that are recognized as indigenous territories, there is no place in which this right to apply their own legal traditions and their own standards of justice can be exercised. Without territorial demarcation, the rights of indigenous peoples guaranteed in the Constitution have been emptied of all content.

There are very compelling reasons why the Bolivarian government over the years has proven itself to lack the political will to follow through on one of the most important achievements of the Constitution of 1999. There has, for one, been an unwillingness to confront the interests of livestock ranchers and mining and logging companies that have continued to encroach upon the territories of indigenous peoples during these years. But the neo-extractivist and neo-developmentalist vision that has characterized the Bolivarian process has been far more important. The demarcation of indigenous territories would have created severe obstacles for the future exploitation of the abundant reserves of minerals such as gold, coltan (niobium and tantalum), diamonds, iron ore, rare earths, radioactive minerals, and many others that are mainly present in territories ancestrally inhabited by indigenous peoples. This became clear with the decree creating the *Arco Minero del Orinoco* that was mentioned earlier in this text. The territories that have been offered for large-scale mining projects to transnational corporations overlap with areas of the traditional territories of the E'ñepa, Hiwi, Mapoyo, Piaroa, Ye'kuana and Kari'ña peoples. Not one of these indigenous peoples has been consulted in relation to this mega-project.

BOLIVARIAN SOCIALISM

The most important political point of inflection that occurred during the years of the Chávez government was its declaration of the Bolivarian revolution as a socialist revolution. This marked a clear breaking point which profoundly altered the course of the political process that had been taking place in the country. It went from a dynamic characterized by inclusion, relative flexibility, and an open future, to a process characterized by more political exclusion, sectarianism, and with increasing vertical and authoritarian tendencies, even a proclivity for Stalinism.

As noted above, the initial project of Chavismo was oriented by general principles and values without a clear project with regards to the desired future society. This project was conceived as rooted in the specificity of the historical experience of the peoples of Latin America, an alternative which clearly distinguished itself from both capitalism and Soviet-style socialism.

This open imaginary went through successive displacements and radicalizations as a result, among other things, of intense confrontations with the Venezuelan right-wing

opposition, the severe threats and destabilizing actions of the United States government, a growing Cuban influence, as well as readings and political reflections by Chávez.

In January 2005, at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, he declared that there is no other way to go beyond capitalism than socialism: *I don't have a doubt. It is necessary, we say and it's said by many intellectuals of the world, to transcend capitalism, but I add, capitalism will not be transcended within capitalism itself, no. Capitalism must be transcended through socialism. That is the way to transcend the capitalist model, real socialism, equality!* (Chávez Frías, 2005)

In the presidential election of 2006, Chávez presented his candidacy as an option for socialism and won with 62.8 percent of the vote. An attempt was made the following year to incorporate socialism as the model of Venezuelan society into the Constitution, as this had not been incorporated in the 1999 Constitution. A national referendum for the reform of the Constitution was held in December 2007. This reform proposal was rejected in spite of the fact that Chávez had presented the referendum as a choice between George Bush and himself. The margin of votes was just over one percent. According to opinion polls, Chávez still had ample backing from the population. However his constitutional reform proposal had almost three million less favorable votes than he had when he won the presidential election of the previous year. Various explanations have been given for this huge collapse in the vote, among them the fact that people were asked to vote "yes" or "no" on 69 amendments (voted on two blocs) that had not been sufficiently discussed. But the fact is that in this referendum the majority of the Venezuelan population did not vote in favor of socialism (Lander, 2007a).

Between the late 1960s and 1970s a rich critical debate had taken place in Venezuela on the experiences of "actual socialism," about different paths in the struggle to overcome capitalism, and alternative modalities of political organization. These discussions took place in the context of the defeat of armed struggle in the country, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, May 1968 in France, and the emergence of Euro communism in the Communist parties of Italy, France, and Spain, as well as the vigorous movement of university renewal (*Renovación universitaria*) that occurred simultaneously in several Venezuelan universities. Central axes of these debates were anti-authoritarianism and the search for new organizational alternatives to the highly centralized undemocratic vertical structures which had historically characterized communist parties. Part of the debate was about the need to overcome the barriers that existed between the structures of political parties and the diversity of organizations, groups, and movements that existed beyond them.[18]

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18 Among the most significant contributions to these debates were Petkoff, 1990; Maneiro, 1997; Harnecker, 2007, and the debates of the Cabimas Cultural Congress in 1970 that gathered together a broad range of left-wing politicians, activists, artists, and intellectuals.

When the Bolivarian process was declared to be "21st-Century Socialism," this was basically done without incorporating any trace of historical memory. The main issues that led to the failure of 20th-century socialism as an alternative to capitalism and the civilization in crisis that were mentioned at the beginning of this text (anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, its monocultural universalistic character, patriarchy, and the blind faith in progress) were not debated. The rich debates of the previous decades in Venezuela had been forgotten because socialism had basically disappeared from the political horizon, because the protagonists of these debates had died, had given up on politics or had adopted neoliberal perspectives. The publications that registered these debates had not been re-edited and were no longer available.

The fact that this socialist project was called "21st-Century Socialism" seemed to imply that this new society would not be similar to the experience of 20th-century socialism, in particular the Soviet experience. However, the idea of socialism could not relieve itself of this historical burden without a critical analysis of these past experiences. In the absence of the will and/or capacity to address the vital issues involved, it was not possible to think that "21st-Century Socialism" would differ significantly from 20th-century socialism. For the young people who enthusiastically joined this political project in the first decade of the century, the idea of socialism was uncontaminated, a promise of a better future, without any historical burdens. For the youth involved in the Frente Francisco de Miranda, created under Cuban ideological influence, socialism was a truth to be applied without any need for critical reflection.

The first worrying sign that the proposed "21st-Century Socialism" did not seem to have learned much from the experience of Soviet socialism came when Chávez made a call for the formation of a single government party.

Chávez declared that in order to advance in the construction of socialism, it was essential to overcome the existing organizational and political divisions between the groups that were part of the government. To this end, he announced that it was necessary to create a single party of the forces supporting the process. He suggested the name: *United Socialist Party of Venezuela* (PSUV).

I declare today that I will create a new party. I invite those who want to, to accompany me... The parties that want to do so, can keep their organizations, but will no longer be part of the government. I want one party to rule. The votes do not belong to any party; those votes belong to Chávez and the people, do not fall for lies. (Chávez Frías, 2016)

Consistent with the manner in which "21st-Century Socialism" was declared, the creation of the new party lacked critical reflection on the historical experience of one-party systems in socialist regimes.

As was noted at the time: Among the vital debates about the experience of the actual socialism of the twentieth century are the issues of the role of the state and the party and their relationship in the possibility of building a democratic society. A state-party that controls each and every area of society eventually suffocates any possibility of debate and dissent, and with that, the very possibility of plurality and democracy. That is why among the core debates required for a democratic socialist society that does not repeat the authoritarian aspects of the last century's experiences are those related to the role of the state, the character of the state, and relations between the state and the plurality of organization and forms of sociability that are grouped under the idea of society. Equally critical are the debates related to the search for political and organizational forms that are more favorable to the construction of an increasingly democratic society. Historical experience strongly suggests that the parity of state and party is not the path to democracy. (Lander, 2006)

Without a raw diagnosis of the reasons why the Soviet state/party led to the establishment of an authoritarian order that had its maximum expression in Stalinism, there are no tools available against the threat of recurrence.

Another sign of things to come in terms of the verticality of the party's structure and the requirement of unconditional loyalty to Chávez was the fact that a political party in the process of being created, a party that still had no members, founding documents, statutes or organizational structures, already had a functioning disciplinary tribunal (Lander, 2007b). In a ceremony held in August 2007, President Chávez, referring to the high level of discipline required from all candidates that wanted to become members of a revolutionary party, reported that a Provisional Disciplinary Council of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela had been created.

As a result of a disagreement with public statements made by someone who was at that time coordinator of the United Socialist Bloc in the National Assembly, Chávez said: *I sent a national leader who aspires to be a party member to the Disciplinary Council for talking nonsense. I'll be very careful (...). Critical thinking is essential for a revolution, but that's a very different thing from going around speaking ill of a party that has still not been born, collecting signatures to be presented I don't know where. Whoever wants to be an anarchist has to get out of here, we do not want him; a creative but disciplined militancy is required here.* (cited in Carolina Díaz & Daniela Espinoza, 2007)

Later, dissenting voices, senior government and party officials who made allegations about the growing corruption in the government, were labeled as traitors and summarily put aside.

Chávez said the PSUV would not be Marxist-Leninist because "*that is a dogmatic thesis out of line with today's reality*" (Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias, 2007). However the statues of the PSUV established democratic centralism as its basic organizational

principle: "*understood as the subordination of the whole of the organization to the leadership, the subordination of all members to their party structures, the subordination of lower level party structures to higher level ones, and the subordination of the minority to the majority* (…)." (PSUV, 2009)

These properly Stalinist tendencies, with which "21st-Century Socialism" took its first steps, closely intertwine with historical and structural trends that precede it in the country. These are the existence of abundant oil resources; a century of a state-centered political and economic system characterized by clientelism; and a long history of military leaderships and governments.

All this was reorganized around Chávez's messianic leadership to crystallize into a Bolivarian rentier socialism.

CAN WE LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE?

With the limitations and/or failures of the experiences of so-called progressive governments in Latin America as alternatives capable of going beyond capitalism and offering at least some initial pathways or transitions away from the civilization in crisis, we are facing the end of several historical cycles. It is not only the short historical cycle of high commodity prices or of the so-called progressive governments. It is also the end of a longer historical cycle, a cycle that could be said to have begun with the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. It is the historical cycle of anti-capitalist struggles based on the idea that through the capture or control of the state it would be possible to bring about a process of profound transformation of the whole of society. This has been the shared belief of revolutionary uprisings such as the assault on the Winter Palace; in European Social Democracy; in Third World liberation movements and guerrilla struggles; and, once again, in the political projects of the progressive governments in South America. We are also at the end of the historical era of *the Revolution*, of the idea according to which it was possible to transform the whole of society, in all its multiple spheres, in a brief period of time. At the same time we are at the end of the historical epoch that – from the most diverse political and ideological standpoints – identified human well-being and happiness with ever increasing material abundance, with *progress,* and unlimited economic growth. The limits of the planet are forcing us to recognize that we have entered a new era.

In today's globalized world what the state does or does not do is in no way indifferent. State policies can make a difference. Public policies may curb some of the most destructive tendencies of neoliberalism. Public policies can contribute or not to an improvement of the living conditions of the population, access to education, health services, social security, etc. Public policies can be geared to repress or to guarantee human rights, protect or discriminate against minorities and migrants, and, to some

extent, can contribute to expanding or reducing inequalities. However democratic policies are not likely to be carried out without strong social and political organizations, networks, and movements that are able to exert pressure and have some degree of influence in blocking or pushing for certain public policies. In spite of the fact that states reproduce within themselves many of the contradictions and tensions of society, in the contemporary post-democratic world, most national state policies are not designed to operate as counter-forces to regulate and control the market, but as guarantors of the conditions required for the market to operate.

There are, on the other hand, many experiences around the world of democratizing dynamics based on an interface between social organizations and some state structures, especially at the local or municipal level. However, as historical experience has clearly shown, the state, the national state, is not, and cannot be, the subject or privileged agent in the struggle to overcome capitalism. Nor can it have the guiding role in the profound cultural transformations required in today's hegemonic civilizational patterns that are threatening life on planet earth. This is particularly so when an overbearing state protagonist blocks or limits the rich plural autonomous potential of the rest of society.

Neo-extractivism, established as the hegemonic regime of accumulation in all countries with so-called progressive governments, is an inevitable consequence of state-centric conceptions of societal transformation. State-centrism and extractivism feed into each other. When the state has been identified as the synthesis of the general interests of the nation, priority has to be given to maximizing state revenues. Given this general interest, every other interest, all other political/cultural options, even if they relate to the preservation of the Amazon or preventing the extermination of indigenous peoples, are considered to be "sectorial" or "corporate" interests. The consequences have been particularly devastating for indigenous peoples and peasant communities whose territories have been opened up to exploitation by public or private, national or foreign, Eastern or Western corporations.

Instead of taking at least some initial steps in the direction of confronting the challenges posed by the civilizational crisis, the political projects and developmental policies of the so-called progressive governments ended up taking on and strengthening the prevalence of consumption and commodification, both in their international relations and within each country. By reaffirming the colonial modes of integration into the international division of labor and nature, these governments have actively contributed to accelerating the dynamics of predatory global capitalist accumulation and climate change. In each of these countries, to some extent, the government's legitimacy and electoral backing have relied on their ability to meet social expectations of ever increasing consumption. This emphasis has contributed to the emergence and consolidation of a culture of consumerism that has, over time, contributed to undermining political support for

the left and to electoral defeats. As remarked by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the PT governments in Brazil were more successful in creating consumers than in creating citizens.

Today we should ask ourselves a non-trivial question that does not have an obvious or easy answer. After more than a decade of so-called progressive governments in South America, are we closer to overcoming capitalism and more capable of responding to the challenges posed by the civilizational crisis, or, on the contrary, has integration into the destructive gears of the reproduction of global capital been deepened, and the hegemonic values of this civilization in crisis been further naturalized?

Apart from its military dimension, the main victory of the counter-revolution of neoliberalism of the last decades has been the profound transformation that has universalized the cultural logic of possessive individualism as the dominant culture on most of the planet. Transformative projects that, in order to achieve and preserve legitimacy, have to rely on strengthening this cultural logic, cannot be considered as valid alternatives in the face of the challenges humanity faces today.

We need to rethink what we mean by the "left" today. Can extractivist developmentalist governments be considered to be "progressive"?[19] Are they "leftist" governments even if their policies lead to the destruction of nature? Are they part of the "left" in spite of their systematic attacks on the plurality of indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures of these societies? If they don't question the patriarchal cultural patterns that, among other things, deny women's sovereignty over their own bodies? If, far from contributing to an expansion of democratic practices, they tend to increase state control and put limits on the exercise of democratic rights and participation? Can economic policies that give priority to increasing primary exports of energy, agricultural, and mineral goods, commodities that contribute to feeding the insatiable machinery of global capital accumulation, be characterized as anti-capitalist policies? Are the notions of the left and the right historically outdated? Are these distinctions relevant for some issues, but not for others?

Moreover, in the global geopolitical field significant displacements have occurred over the last decades. Reductionist binary categories such as "North/South" and "imperialist/anti-imperialist," grounded in identifying the United States as the only empire, are no longer adequate for understanding the changing realities of the contemporary world system. This has led the left to considering as friends or anti-imperialist allies governments and movements that have conflicts with the United States, even when these are as undemocratic and vastly distant from that *other possible world* to which we aspire

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19 In rigorous terms these governments can be considered to be progressive, but in a different sense from what this characterizations is usually assumed to mean. They are progressive in the sense that they have not abandoned a blind faith in unlimited economic growth and progress.

as Russia, China, Iran, Belarus, and Syria. From a socio-environmental perspective, are Chinese and Russian transnational corporations, public or private, any better than corporations based in the United States or the European Union?

It is absolutely necessary to reflect critically on the experience of the so-called progressive governments in Latin America in order to understand not only what has happened, but why it happened. We know the story of the complicity of communist parties all over the world with the horrors of Stalinism. This was not mainly due to lack of sufficient information. This complicity was the product of a Manichean conception according to which the world was divided between imperialism (bad) and anti-imperialism (good). To the extent that the Soviet Union was challenging United States imperialism, it was considered desirable to take sides, to show solidarity, leaving aside other issues such as the totalitarian nature of the regime and the Gulag, core issues for the millions of people who lived this experience. The issue of how many people were killed has been a taboo for a good part of the non-Trotskyite left. Many decades have passed, and although there were a wide variety of positions within the left in relation to the Soviet bloc, in many parts of the world the left is still paying for the consequences of not being able to clearly disassociate itself from the authoritarian dimensions of that historical experience.

This story is repeated over and over again. Today the Spanish analyst Santiago Alba Rico warns us about what he calls the "tomb of the left" in Aleppo, Syria. In Middle Eastern geopolitics, the government of Bashar al-Asad in Syria (which according to Alba Rico has been a "murderer of hundreds of thousands of Syrians bombed, tortured, or disappeared") has been seen by large sections of the left as an anti-imperialist ally, or as a "lesser evil" to the imperialist project in the region.

In order to allow Asad large-scale killing it has been necessary to lie a lot: it has been necessary to deny that the Syrian regime was dictatorial and even more, to affirm that it is anti-imperialist, socialist and humanist…

Much of the world left has been placed in effect at the margin of ethics and on the side of dictators and of the many imperialisms that subdue the region […] this new error, added to many others, can turn out to be very costly. (Alba Rico, 2016)

We need critical solidarity with anti-capitalist struggles. Uncritical solidarity only serves to reinforce the most negative tendencies of these struggles and does not allow us to learn from experience.

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NABÓN COUNTY: **BUILDING *LIVING WELL* FROM THE BOTTOM UP**

Miriam Lang and Mabrouka M'Barek

ECUADOR

Ecuador, a country in the northwest of South America, has made international headlines in the last ten years since it introduced revolutionary concepts and principles into its new constitution, drafted in 2008. Nature, or "La *Pachamama*," was declared to have rights of its own. *Buen Vivir – Sumak Kawsay* in the indigenous *Kichwa* language, which is accurately translated as "living in plenitude" – was introduced as a guiding principle. And the state was declared plurinational, in recognition of the existence of 14 indigenous peoples, each of which have their own forms of social organization, their own health and educational systems as well as systems of justice and reparation for dealing with conflict. The establishment of a Constitutional Assembly had been one of the core demands of the powerful social struggles against neoliberalism since the 1990s. Four elected presidents were removed from power by popular protest in less than a decade, between 1997 and 2005. After this long period of instability, in 2006, a new political movement called *Alianza País* (Country Alliance) with Rafael Correa as its candidate won the elections. This economist, who had spent many years studying abroad during the social struggles of the 1990s, nevertheless very convincingly included most of the social and political demands of the last decade in his political agenda. In 2007, he also initially embraced the initiative to "leave the oil in the soil"[1] in Yasuní National Park, a megadiverse region in the Ecuadorian Amazon basin, before eventually authorizing its exploitation in August 2013.

Correa finally left Ecuador's executive power in May 2017 to hand it over to his elected successor Lenin Moreno, from the same party. Yet, this article does not intend to offer an assessment of Correa's government, nor of him as a president. Instead, we will focus on one very concrete experience of building *Sumak Kawsay* from the bottom up which has not always proceeded in harmony with the discourses on *Buen Vivir* articulated by the national government. Instead of discussing Rafael Correa's political legacy in a general way, we will address the policies of his government only where they interfered – for better or worse – with the local process we intend to describe. Our analysis is situated in a rural and sparsely inhabited county in the Southern Andes region of Ecuador called Nabón where, in less than two decades, a significant process of multidimensional transformation and alternative-building in the spirit of *Sumak Kawsay*, or *Buen Vivir*, has taken place in a strikingly democratic way. *Sumak Kawsay* is an open and contested concept which constitutes one of the most important Andean contributions to the debate on alternatives to development (cf. Lang & Mokrani, 2013). It considers humans as part of Nature, and thus promotes harmonic relations with all other beings, placing emphasis on communitarian construction from below in a territorial sense, which leaves plenty of room for diversity. Other important principles are equilibrium, reciprocity, and complementarity, instead of accumulation, progress, growth, and competition (cf. Capitán, García & Ghuaza, 2014).

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1 Slogan taken from a poem by the Nigerian activist Nnimmo Bassey, which he read at the opening ceremony of the World People's Conference on Climate Change, held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, on April 20, 2010: "Leave the oil in the soil, the coal in the hole and the tar sands in the land!"

Our interest in the county of Nabón rests on the fact that this territory has undergone a substantial and measurable social transformation in the last two decades which, as we argue in this article, could be framed as an implementation of the *Buen Vivir* paradigm.

Indeed, from being seen as one of the most miserable regions in the country, Nabón evolved to be one of the most inspiring models of the concept of *Buen Vivir* for the Constituent Assembly which took place in Ecuador in 2007-2008. Others regions have suffered a similarly high rate of migration, depended on remittances from abroad to survive, but none have shown social changes comparable to those in Nabón. So what has happened? How did this important turnabout take place?

Adapting the analytic framework developed by the Global Working Group Beyond Development and presented in the introduction to this book, we have analyzed what occurred in the territory of Nabón as a process of multidimensional alternative construction. Our analysis shows how a radical process of democratization was able to address some of the patterns of domination, like patriarchal and racist relations within the diverse population of the county, which had trapped the population in poverty. Once people became protagonists of their own lives, they could also reverse some of the negative effects of recent modern development, in particular by building more harmonic relations with Nature and improving food sovereignty. Amid the deceptive revolutionary rhetoric of Latin America's Socialism of the Twenty-First Century, which was founded on taking over central state power and implementing top-down change from there, Nabón went countercurrent, engaging in a transformation process rooted in local practices and knowledges and reshaping the local territory in a sovereign manner. At the same time, we show how *Buen Vivir* remains a fragile counterculture, constantly threatened by the profit logic of transnational capitalism, which in Nabón materializes for example through mining concessions granted by the national government.

In order to situate the experience, this article begins with a historical overview of the Nabón region, placing emphasis on the resulting constellation of power relations. The next section examines the exceptional role international actors like the Swiss cooperation have played in this process. In the third section, we will then focus on the transformation of the existing municipal institutionality, which was guided by the objective of strengthening democracy and building a comprehensive system of participation, understood as decision-making from below. Here, we will also describe the system of participatory and solidary budgeting in accordance with sociocultural criteria that Nabón has developed and continues to implement up to the present time. This section will also look into the effects that the process of de-patriarchalization, led by two successive female mayors, has generated, as well as its de-colonizing dimensions, which have profoundly transformed the relations between the mestizo and the indigenous population in the territory of Nabón. From the perspective of the Ecuadorian debate, this

is not only framed as the building of interculturality, but also of plurinationality, since indigenous peoples define themselves as nations of their own within the territory of the nation-state. The fourth section analyzes how societal relations with Nature have evolved in Nabón, up to and since the adoption of the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, which has made Nature a holder of rights. Here the analysis revolves around two main axes: The way in which the population regained its food sovereignty by systematically changing agricultural practices and caring for water, and the threats this process faces through mining concessions. The fifth section of this article sheds light on the struggles around culture, knowledge, and education which have shaped the base of knowledge that underpins the process. Subsequently, we analyze how the transformative paradigm of *Buen Vivir* has been resignified by the government of Rafael Correa and how, in contrast, the inhabitants of Nabón frame it themselves. And finally, the seventh and last section evaluates the relationship between the local process in Nabón and the central government of the Citizen Revolution as an external condition for its durability. It also considers certain differences between *Buen Vivir* as a horizon for multidimensional transformation and more conventional left-wing strategies of social change.

THE HISTORICAL CONFIGURATION OF POWER RELATIONS IN NABÓN

At the end of the 20th century, Nabón County was officially listed as one of the poorest counties in the country. According to the census of 2001, more than 90 percent of the population was considered poor according to unsatisfied basic needs, and 76.4 percent even lived in extreme poverty (INEC 2001, cit. in Brassel, Herrera, & Laforge, 2008: p. 8). By then, many men had migrated in order to support their families. Their remittances from abroad generated 60 percent of local income. Hunger and malnutrition were well known in Nabón, where poor, eroded soil could not provide the necessary food for self-consumption, while at the same time more than 90 percent of the population were peasants.

A visitor recalls his impression of those days: "*When I first got there, the only thing there was a desolate landscape with a society in poverty. The only difference in Nabón was that some people were even poorer than others, but all were poor*" (Unda, 2007, cit. in Herrera, 2009: p. 29).

Just sixteen years later, 97 percent of houses have access to drinking water (Quezada, 2017); sewage infrastructure coverage improved from 13.7 percent in 2001 (SIISE-INEC, 2001)to 20.4 percent ten years later (SIISE-INEC, 2010)and today supplies all village houses. Road infrastructure is significantly better; chronic malnutrition in children under five years of age in the canton plummeted to a rate of 33 percent in 2014 (PYDLOS, 2014) compared to 67.3 percent in 2001 (SIISE-INEC, 2001), and migration declined slightly, with 6.57 percent per the 2010 (SIISE-INEC, 2010) census compared

to 7 percent in 2006 (PEDCN, 2006). Income is once again mainly generated by the agricultural and artisanal production of the people of Nabón (Quezada, 2017). Even by 2008, female heads of households earned 270 percent more than a decade before, and the average income had risen by around 180 percent (Unda & Jácome, 2009: p. 39).

Official data from the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses do show a slight drop in poverty, from 92.9 percent to 87.8 percent (SIISE-INEC, 2001, 2010) between 2001 and 2010. But since the unsatisfied basic needs criteria that was applied puts emphasis on access to public services, it does not capture all the dimensions of the transformation in terms of well-being that have taken place in Nabón.[2]

We would like to draw attention to the fact that, in contrast to these official, rather moderate numbers in poverty reduction, most people in Nabón state they are happy: in a survey regarding *subjective well-being* led by the University of Cuenca in 2012 and 2013, the vast majority of the local population expressed overall satisfaction with their lives. This survey, which was carried out in 2012 in 15 percent of Nabón's households by an initiative overseen by a consortium of local governments in Azuay, subscribes to the approach taken by Bhutan's Gross Happiness Index, which seeks to innovate the quantitative measurement of well-being (Ura et al., 2012). The survey inquired about issues central for well-being, such as whether people were satisfied with their freedom of choice and their capacity to control their own lives – to which, on average, more than 70 percent of the people responded "very satisfied." Furthermore, the survey asked them about their satisfaction with their occupation, their family life, their financial situation, their leisure time, their environmental surroundings, their housing, their spiritual life, food security, etc. The results of this survey showed 75.8 percent of the local population of Nabón expressing high satisfaction with their overall lives (Morocho, 2013), and this despite 87.8 percent of its inhabitants being declared poor by the Statistical Institute. This profound contrast might shed light on the fact that standardized quantitative poverty indicators like income poverty or basic needs do not necessarily give a comprehensive picture of well-being or quality of life, as they do not take into account either the specificities of each context or cultural differences. Thus, they tend to single out rural zones, characterizing them as poor, as the standards regarding the decency of housing, access to public services etc. are mostly drawn from urban/modern modes of living (for an extensive discussion of this subject see Lang, 2017).

Traditionally a zone of agricultural production, Nabón has faced poverty as a direct result of erosion and the severe degradation of soil due to deforestation and the intensive monoculture of grain (wheat, barley, corn) on steep slopes vulnerable to washing out by bad irrigation practices, heavy rainfalls, and wind. By the mid-20th century, the region

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2   Mayor Magali Quezada also questions the data produced by the 2010 census regarding access to drinking water, which appeared to be significantly lower than the data produced by the municipality of Nabón (interview conducted by Miriam Lang on September 20, 2017).

had already undergone an intense course of deforestation to provide coal for the new railway and the construction of the Panamericana road, but also because of an intensified demand for firewood and fine wood in the nearby city of Cuenca. The opening up of more areas for agriculture and livestock activities also served as a motive to cut down forests.

Between the 16th and the 18th century, the period when haciendas were set up by the Catholic Church, the native inhabitants of the region experienced the dispossession and agricultural concentration of their land. The hacienda system was a system of social and political organization, production, and reproduction, widespread in colonial Latin America. It was a rentier system, based on the monopoly of land tenure and a form of exploitation of labor similar to slavery which expropriated and subordinated indigenous communities by force (Herrera, 2009; Carpio Benalcázar, 2009: pp. 11-15; Unda & Jácome, 2009: pp. 9-10).

At the beginning of the 20th century, liberal reforms introduced under President Eloy Alfaro not only declared Ecuador a lay state, but also largely dismantled the property of the Church – including the haciendas around Nabón. New legislation brought significant changes to the labor system, abolishing servitude for the indigenous population and generalizing paid labor relations instead. Former religious haciendas were confiscated by the state in order to be resold to former workers later on, a process which began around 1930 and went on over the following decades (Herrera, 2008: p. 81). The people of Nabón struggled to regain possession of their land until official agrarian reform policies were introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of the first wave of Latin American developmentism, aimed at modernizing rural regions and improving pre-capitalist conditions.

It is important to point out that Nabón is the county with the largest concentration of indigenous inhabitants, namely people of Inca-Cañari origins, who live in Azuay province in the south of Ecuador (Carpio Benalcázar, 2009: p. 12). Once legally liberated from servitude, peonage, or unpaid domestic service in the case of women, and granted new social rights, these indigenous people united to collectively buy large parcels of land and eventually formed four legally recognized indigenous communes, successively in 1939, 1944, 1966, with the last one in 1985, which still exist today. These communities are organized according to the principles of indigenous Andean sociopolitical organization, which is essentially based on three pillars: a direct assembly democracy led by a yearly rotating *cabildo* of five elected people, unpaid community work for building and maintaining collective infrastructure, and the collective ownership of land. These indigenous principles of territorial and sociopolitical organization have been recognized by the Ecuadorian state since the first commune's law was issued in 1937 (Martínez Valle, 2002: p. 11).

The process of getting rid of the haciendas lasted several decades, from 1930 up to the 1960s and 1970s, the decades in which Ecuador underwent agrarian reform. The experience of servitude has left its mark on the population and continues to have a great impact

on subjectivities: "They treated us like animals, and we were thinking like animals," recalls a woman of Nabón (Herrera, 2009: p. 37). The fact that throughout these struggles the former hacienda workers were not given the land back for free, but had to buy it, set a precedent for the unequal distribution of land which has perpetuated a structural inequality rooted in the system of domination created by the hacienda system. According to the position they formerly held on the hacienda, some people had been allowed to own animals, others to only grow plants on a small plot of land. This former position now determined the amount of money people could dispose of to buy land, or their capacity to pay back potential loans for acquiring land. Since legal dispositions, which were in force until 1973, only recognized men as heads of households, women were systematically excluded from officially owning and having authority over a piece of land as well as the means of production on that land. Subsequently, new individual land titles and usufruct rights concerning the communes were exclusively registered in men's names (Herrera, 2008: p. 83). Today, the territory of Nabón County is divided into four parishes[3], mainly inhabited by the mestizo population, in addition to those four indigenous communes.

Finally, it is important to note that the colonial matrix of power has been a determinant factor of influence in the distribution of land. In Nabón County, the indigenous communes were pushed towards higher land, to areas which often have *páramo* ecosystems[4] that are not suitable for agriculture, or to less fertile lands characterized by steeper slopes, allowing for less intense exploitation, enough to feed only small livestock such as chickens, rabbits, and the traditional guinea pigs. By contrast, the mestizo population lives in the lower areas which are fertile ground for intense exploitation and the breeding of cattle and horses. During the postcolonial process, everything associated with indigeneity was systematically inferiorized. The indigenous constituted the symbolic imaginary from which people had to flee and keep their distance. Mestizo identity emerged as a negation of the indigenous and subsequently as a path for upward social mobility. As a result, relations between mestizo and indigenous populations have been shaped by a habitual racism (Herrera, 2009: p. 39) rooted in the legacy of colonialism.

Since liberal reforms meant a significant increase in the cost of human labor, they led to changes in agricultural production systems. The remaining non-church-owned haciendas of the Nabón area modernized and intensified their grain monoculture production, leading progressively to an excessive use of agrochemicals (Urena Rivas, 2017). New small independent farmers were able to find new circuits to sell their surplus. In the

3   A parish is the smallest possible territorial circumscription in Ecuador, and the term does not bear any religious connotations

4   The *páramo* is the ecosystem of the regions above the continuous forest line in the Andes, yet below the permanent snowline. Its vegetation is composed mainly of giant rosette plants, shrubs, and grasses which act like giant sponges, thereby enabling its most important ecological function: the storage of water.

context of the Green Revolution[5] during the 1960s, Nabón County experienced a boom in agricultural production and was known as the province's granary, producing mainly wheat, barley, corn, and potatoes. But only a few years later, in the 1970s, the deterioration of the soil was already evident and production declined significantly. This led to periods of high seasonal and permanent migration, mostly of the male population, because the agricultural production no longer enabled families to live well. Those families with only small properties were sometimes unable to even produce enough to feed themselves sufficiently. The men went to seek work in the banana production of the Ecuadorian coastal region, in the gold mines of the South, as construction workers in the cities, or in the oil fields of the Amazon. Emigration from Nabón was further boosted around 1999 and 2000, when Ecuador experienced its worst economic and financial crisis, which led to the most significant emigration wave in the history of the country, mostly to the United States and Spain (Municipio de Nabón, 2006: p. 8-11). As a consequence of financial deregulation and a foreign debt crisis, in addition to severe damage caused by the *El Niño* climatic phenomenon in 1997 and 1998, Ecuador experienced a series of bank failures and government bailouts before the government declared a so-called "national bank holiday" and a one-year deposit freeze in March 1999. As a result of the measures taken by the government of Jamil Mahuad to prevent a collapse of the whole financial sector which caused hyperinflation and major economic instability, many people lost their jobs and savings. The crisis hit those who were already vulnerable the hardest. President Jamil Mahuad was finally ousted from office by an indigenous-military coalition on January 22, 2000.

In Nabón, the massive emigration of men brought about a significant shift in the gendered division of labor and a feminization of the local population. At the turn of the millennium, there were 118 women to every 100 men in Nabón (Herrera, 2009: p. 30). Women were now in charge of all kinds of work, both productive and reproductive, as well as communitarian work and political participation – but, in most cases, they were still not the formal owners of the land, and when they were, they owned the less productive and smallest plots. This situation led to a systematic work overload for women and to an overall sensation of hardship: "For us, poverty clearly meant a lack of food," explains Magali Quezada, the current mayor of Nabón.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL POTENTIALS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Paradoxically, in the context of development criticism that this book seeks to promote, change in Nabón first began with a project led by the Swiss development cooperation

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5   This was an international movement, beginning in the mid-20th century, towards an increase in the production of food grains (especially wheat and rice) that in large part was enabled by the introduction of new, high-yielding varieties requiring large amounts of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to countries of the Global South. It caused environmental damage and led to concentration processes in agriculture (for a critical assessment see Shiva, 1991).

agency COSUDE, which started to work in the indigenous zone of the county in 1996. The indigenous communities took an active part in a contextualized needs assessment, which led the "Proyecto Nabón" to focus mainly on appropriate technology for irrigation, small loans, and agricultural production on a family scale. Sprinkler systems were installed in places where irrigation by gravity flow[6] was washing out the soil, in order to prevent erosion. Peasants could borrow project money to buy tools, but had to repay it afterwards. Because of its geographical remoteness and the stigma of poverty, the county was basically cut off from access to credit by the official banking system. For this reason, COSUDE put an emphasis on the generation of communitarian credit associations based on mutual trust, as people knew each other personally (Samaniego, 2009). The vast majority of these local savings associations were run by women, who mostly were the ones in need of credit. These local savings associations also opened up the possibility of access to credit for indigenous people, who, in the racist climate of the time, could still simply be thrown out of a commercial banking institution and thus were dependent on local usurers. Later on, using the funds from the tool loans which they returned to the project as seed capital, the peasants managed to convince the provincial savings cooperative Jardín Azuayo to open a local office in Nabón. Today there are more than 90 savings associations administering self-organized credit in the county which are still run mainly by women.

Both irrigation and access to relatively cheap small loans, together with the vision of strengthening a small, organic, and diverse peasant agriculture on the basis of collective organization, were crucial to the rebuilding of agricultural productivity in the county. Due to the particular vision of its Ecuadorian coordinator, René Unda, COSUDE's intervention was unique since it was designed from the beginning as a long-lasting, sustained process in which the demonstration of quick results and efficiency were not important. This approach represents a polar opposite to mainstream development cooperation, which generally focuses on modern, export-oriented agroindustry, and rests on the principle of global competition and comparative advantage. Finally, and most importantly, the process in Nabón was conceived as a democratic process in which the people of Nabón themselves, and not 'experts' from outside, would be the protagonists of change (Samaniego, 2009). To support the process, technical advisers were taught to thoroughly respect practical and ancestral knowledge, so that their intervention would follow the lines of a true dialogue of knowledges.

This process acquired a whole new dimension regarding the possibilities of change when, in 2000, for the first time in local history, a woman won the municipal elections of Nabón County. The woman was Amelia Erráez, a candidate of the political movement Pachakutik, which was founded in 1995 by the national indigenous umbrella organization CONAIE as its "political arm."

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6   A system of canals and furrows through which water freely flows downwards.

Erráez, born to an indigenous father and a mestizo mother, had experienced racism and discrimination herself and witnessed it constantly, as she recalls: Mestizo people would not put up with sitting next to an indigenous person. (…) There was a lot of violence. The indigenous people were drinking a lot and would sometimes beat their women in the street. The mestizos would throw bottles and stones at them, shouting that they were soiling Nabón. They [the mestizos] would simply take their sheep or other animals away – while on the other hand they were selling them the liquor.[7]

Erráez, a school teacher who would later be school principal in the zone, had also been part of several processes of social organization. Erráez was the local president of the teacher's union and had played a prominent role in the movement for the administrative creation of Nabón County in the 1980s[8], and in the collective elaboration of a local development plan in the late 1990s. Erráez ran for mayor as the candidate for a network of social organizations in Nabón because she knew that collective action was crucial to changing the fate of the County.Erráez invited the team of Proyecto Nabón to collaborate with the municipality and to extend their activities, which had initially been limited to indigenous areas, to the entire county. Subsequently, knowledge about participatory planning, forest management, and agroecological production was transferred to the local government. As a consequence, a department of environmental management was created, and a new system of participatory decision-making, developed on the basis of years of experience in the indigenous zone, was introduced. The second phase of this Swiss cooperation project focused on more specific knowledge- and skill-building such as food processing, carpentry, computing, environmental management, and integral farm management (Quezada, 2017).

TRANSFORMING AND EXTENDING EXISTING INSTITUTIONS

Amelia Erráez was the first female mayor in the history of Nabón. Under her leadership, the municipality of Nabón ceased to be a political platform for the accumulation of individual power fueled by clientelism and paternalist relations, as is the case in patriarchal and (post)colonial Latin American political culture. "Corruption was the mother of everything," Erráez remembers. She recalls that even in order to achieve Nabón's creation as an independent county, provincial prefects asked for money. Justifying bribery, they would say that to get the authorities to commit, they would have to invite them to special venues or give them bottles of whisky.[9]

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7   Interview with Amelia Erráez conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017

8   Until 1987, and going back to the 19th century, Nabón was part of Girón, another bigger county in Azuay province. Its municipalization was an important step towards it becoming autonomous in decision-making and building local well-being (Herrera, 2009: p. 57).

9   Interview with Amelia Erráez conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

Relations between citizens and the municipality were similarly based on arbitrary trade transactions; the citizens' right to a service and the officials' duty to provide it free of charge did not exist in practice. Each administration only served its own group, while the majority of people were not taken into account: "Before, when we went to the municipality, we always had to bring a chicken under the arm," recalls Saúl Capelo from the El Progreso parish. Amelia Erráez expands on this: "The municipality was a very distant thing for them, they didn't know what it was, what function it had. They thought the only thing they could do was to beg, to beg and beg again" (Samaniego, 2009: p. 89). As a new mayor, Erráez attempted a breakthrough by introducing anti-patriarchal principles for the dissemination of power into the local state institution: she and her team have transformed the local state decision-making process structure into a collectively managed instrument aimed at empowering the local population. The municipality of Nabón ceased to be used as an instrument of domination and became instead an institution working on restoring dignity.

Since 2000, Nabón has been governed successively by two women, Amelia Erráez (2000-2009) and Magali Quezada (2009-2017), who had served during the first period as council member and vice-mayor. Both were politically close to Pachakutik, the political arm of the indigenous movement. These two women have given a local meaning to the Zapatista principle of "*mandar obedeciendo*," governing by obeying. Both Amelia Erráez and Magali Quezada participated in a network of alternative local governments organized by Pachakutik which was founded at the national level around 2000 and provided political education and the possibility of internships and exchanges in order for participants to learn both theory and practice. At that time, ten years after the national indigenous uprising and five years after the foundation of the political movement Pachakutik, the movement already governed a number of municipalities who were seeking to implement the principles of indigenous Andean philosophy: "Do not steal, do not lie, do not be idle," as well as the principle of building from the bottom up, according to a communitarian assembly-based logic.[10] When Erráez won in Nabón, some of them, like Cotacachi in the northern province of Imbabura, where Auki Tituaña was one of Ecuador's first indigenous mayors, already had some years of experience in building organic democracy. According to Erráez, by then Pachakutik was a rather loose formation in which people were not even members, but only adherents, and which was guided more by a set of principles than by a strict partisan program. Both mayors recall the network of alternative local governments as an important space where they and some of their collaborators acquired crucial knowledge for the challenge they had to face.[11]

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10   Interview with Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 20, 2017.

11   Interview with Amelia Erráez conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18 and 19, 2017. Interview with Magali Quezada on September 20, 2017.

In consequence, both mayors used the leeway that existing local state institutions gave them, but rearranged and extended them in some aspects with the aim of establishing a decision-making process from the bottom up. Overthrowing state institutionality had never been on the horizon of the indigenous movement in Ecuador. The objective was to convert existing institutions into a tool for *Buen Vivir* and rebuild the population's trust in them. As a result, decisions are now taken on the basis of a direct assembly-based democracy and consensus, rather than on the basis of a majority vote cast in the elected local legislative power, the *concejo municipal*, whose members usually follow partisan logic.

STEPS TOWARDS DE-PATRIARCHALIZATION

In addition to introducing new instituent practices, Erráez and Quezada symbolically and structurally began to de-patriarchalize politics in the county of Nabón. Alexandra Ochoa, who was part of this process from its beginnings and today is responsible for cultural management in the municipality, recalls the reaction of the men when women first entered the realm of local political power in Nabón:

At the beginning all [authorities] were men. If there were twenty women and one man, this man would be elected president. Because they would be saying that we had no time, because of the children, the house, and a lot of other stuff. But it was also a matter of self-esteem, we ourselves would say, no, not me. (…) At that time, when I had to go into the municipal council to ask for money for women's activities, I was still at the door when the bunch of old men who were there would say: 'Yeah, here you got something for the women and now please leave.' So our strategy, once we had identified which ones were especially rebel against us women, was to call them to participate in all kinds of round tables on health, youth, and women. (…) There, they wanted to demonstrate their aptitude.

At first, de-patriarchalization was a subtle process entailing the inclusion of women that was not named as such.[12] Over the years, the politics around gender justice gradually became more explicit, especially within the municipality. Employees were encouraged to study gender at the University of Cuenca. Gender quotas were included in hiring procedures, and a flexible and mother-friendly institutional culture was established.[13] Many women from the county have expressed their pride in having female mayors and how this fact has helped them to feel empowered.

Magali Quezada points out how this was a gradual process and how it was also strengthened by structural elements, for example in the budget allocation: Before, you would not see women neighborhood leaders, neighborhood presidents, presidents of

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12   Interview with Amelia Erráez conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

13   Interview with Jessica Naula, director of projects at the municipality,
     conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

organizations, women in the parish councils, women in social organizations, women demanding that things be accomplished, commissions led by women coming [to the municipality], women making demands about their issues. There is also a budget that is based on the idea of gender, to take into account the most vulnerable members of the population such as children, female heads of households, and I believe that this is a change. Before, you would never have seen such things. (cit. in Herrera, 2009: p. 185).

Indigenous community leader Sergio Morocho from the Shiña commune acknowledges that after participating in a women-led process for years, he has a completely different view of how relationships within his family, towards his wife and children, should be – a rather important dimension of well-being, normally made invisible in statistical measurements: "*Today, I feel I have not given them the affection and understanding they needed, in retrospect I feel regret, because money does not save a person, not at all. I have five children, and the three eldest migrated. I have only been able to keep the youngest ones here.*"[14]

In the communities, women were encouraged to overcome their shame and to speak out and men slowly got used to their presence in the assemblies and to their ability to make decisions. People were also made aware of gender justice, especially by working closely with communitarian authorities. A Leadership Training School for Women, offering one-year leadership programs, was established in 2016 in partnership with the Union of Indigenous Communities of Azuay (UCIA), the regional indigenous organization which has its headquarters in Nabón. At the inauguration of the school on May 21, 2016, Mayor Quezada set the tone by declaring that "women can acquire knowledge to make the territory a different bet: an inclusive territory where they are part not only of the work of the *minga* and in the house, but of defining the public policies that women want in the territory."[15] The school has the objective of training, every year, sixty women who have been vetted by their community, on topics such as: self-esteem, gender, human rights, violence, organization, advocacy, leadership, education, reproductive health, communication, and the Quechua language. Mama Juana, an octogenarian indigenous community leader who was persecuted in the 1990s for her activism in the indigenous movement, recalls that she learnt to be a leader from her mother and from the intercultural school for indigenous women leaders "Dolores Cacuango" that was run by the CONAIE at the national level until recently. Mama Juana sees Nabón's Leadership Training School as a powerful alternative and as a chance to inspire young women to serve their community in leadership positions following the indigenous ethics of *Buen Vivir*.[16]

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14   Interview with Sergio Morocho conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

15   Official communiqué #DSC-1380 by the Autonomous Decentralized Municipal Government of Nabón, http://www.nabon.gob.ec/portal/index.php/15-en/181-escuela-de-formacion-de-lideresas [accessed July 14, 2017].

16   Juana Morocho in Nabón during the field visit of the Global Working roup Beyond Development on May 13, 2017.

A strong material indicator that a process of de-patriarchalization has taken place relates to women's control over land and productive processes: According to the cadaster of Nabón, in 2006, only 5 percent of land property was legally possessed by women, although women were already playing a leading role in the struggles to regain land possession and in agricultural production (Herrera, 2009: p. 42). An actualization of the cadaster carried out in 2016 for the county's four parishes[17] shows that, nowadays, an average of 37.5 percent of the plots are owned by women.

According to the municipality's director of planning and projects, Yessica Naula, this significant increase of 32.5 percent in ten years is due to a cultural change within the population: Women are the ones who lead the organizations on the ground, both the savings associations and the productive associations. They also need their land titles in order to ask for credit at the Jardín Azuayo Cooperative, as a guarantee. Women have a much more active role now that allows them to ensure their rights, for example in being taken into account when inheritances are passed over. Additionally, the municipality encouraged the legalization of land in general, as back in 2006, many plots were not legalized at all.[18]

Nevertheless, the Nabón process also shows the resilience of the patriarchal system to transformation. Today, in 2017, women speaking out in assemblies are often a minority, and Estefanía Lalvay, the young Cañari woman who currently presides over the provincial indigenous organization Unión de Comunidades Indígenas del Azuay (UCIA) believes: "Although the situation is better than some years before, many more years of women's leadership school are still necessary to achieve gender equity."[19] Fernando Vega, a former member of the Constituent Assembly in Montecristi (2007-2008) and scholar at the University in Cuenca who has accompanied the process in Nabón for several years, states in contrast that the process of women's empowerment might even have lost force in recent years. He supposes that the generational transition between female leaderships has partly failed, as "many young women who went to the city to work or to study at the university do not show the same enthusiasm to support the processes inside the communities." For Vega, this is a well-known dilemma: while contact with modernity allows women to move forward individually, at the same time, it unlinks them from communitarian processes (Vega, 2016: p. 202).

DEEPENING DEMOCRACY

The new system of participatory local decision-making was based on the recognition of the value of the Andean Cosmovision and indigenous forms of social organization, with

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17   As the indigenous zone has its own form of traditional administration, the municipality has no data on the control of women over land in these areas.

18   Interview with Yessica Naula conducted by Miriam Lang by telephone on October 27, 2017.

19   Interview with Estefanía Lalvay conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on October 1, 2017.

a strong emphasis on the general assembly as the most important body of decision-making, but also on the principles of complementarity, reciprocity, solidarity, and unpaid community work (*minga*). This official recognition of indigenous ways of doing things by the local authorities was a crucial first step in transforming the tense interethnic relations which used to characterize the county into a prosperous intercultural conviviality where indigenous and mestizo voices have the same weight. In Nabón, instead of denigrating the indigenous population and considering inferior everything related to it, the new system considers its indigenous heritage an inspiration and a model which could be implemented throughout the county's territory, including the zones where mestizos are in the majority.

Mayor Magali Quezada talks to a citizen of Nabón

At the same time, during those first years, the municipality came up with the slogan "The wealth of Nabón is its people" in order to counter the humiliating narrative of poverty and underdevelopment that the central state statistics had imposed on the population of Nabón: With the Nabón project, seeds and agricultural contributions were available. We could have just given them out, but we saw that if we just give we will maintain the situation that existed before. People would keep on being mendicants.

Everyone was stretching out their hands and saying: give it to me, give it to me, and whoever stretched them out the furthest got more. And we thought, this should not be the way; we should not promote mendicancy. We ought to promote self-reliance. We saw that self-esteem was very low.

So we created this slogan: the wealth of Nabón is its people, and we put it everywhere, together with the other half: *minga* for life. In this way we told people, you can do it – of course we will move forward. People felt appreciated. And so they said: *I am a part of this*.[20]

The slogan not only challenged the narrow view of wealth as monetary income or access to goods and services; it also meant recognizing the hardworking, mainly female local population, their efforts to regain food sovereignty, and their specific situated knowledge. An initial diagnosis of needs was then carried out, not by external development experts, but by the population itself, in community assemblies. Seventy-nine coordinators were selected to communicate the priorities of the people in the different territories to the municipality, in order to avoid all the inhabitants of Nabón having to travel frequently to the central village – as the geographical area covered by the county is considerable and transportation was deficient at the time. One indicator of the way in which this process has been consolidated is that nowadays, there is only a need for six such coordinators who still serve as the bridge between the territorial bases and the central county administration.

The new forms of local policy-making were built around a comprehensive organizational structure which integrated already existing structures. This comprises monthly meetings at the community level (a community being an agglomeration of houses which can be part of a legal commune with collective land, or of a parish with individual land titles) and trimestral meetings at the parish or commune level, whose decisions are then transmitted to the county's development and planning committee which operates under national law.

One main axis and goal of participation are the decisions around the municipal budget, especially regarding public expenditure. Nabón implemented a method of participatory budgeting that bridges between the situated needs and priorities of its people and the formal requirements of the central state and the law. Based on information relating to available public funds, each community, and in turn each parish or commune, decide their spending priorities, which are then compiled by municipal employees and made public in the county's first general assembly each August (for the following year). In September and October, municipal employees translate this general budget into the format of an annual operative plan, also required by the law. The result is made transparent and approved in a second general assembly in October, so that each citizen knows exactly how much money is coming to his or her community and for what purpose. A third and final general assembly is held in January for the previous year's reporting and accountability and official approval of the new year's budget (Quezada, 2017).

At the same time, the overall municipal budget is not assigned only on the basis of a proportional rule that takes the different territories into account, but rather according

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20   Interview with Amelia Erráez conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

to several specific sociopolitical and ecological criteria which have been elaborated in cooperation with a team from the University of Cuenca. For example, 15 percent of the budget is divided between all areas following the principle of equity. Forty percent is assigned according to the demographic of the population of each area: How many people live there? How many are women and female heads of households? How many children or elderly people live there? Another 25 percent is distributed to areas which lack basic infrastructure like access to drinking water, irrigation, sewage etc. And finally, the last 20 percent is assigned following an evaluation of the ecological conditions of each territory, such as the loss or regeneration of forests, vulnerability, fertility etc.

Local regulations that institutionalized these proceedings were also brought in in a participatory way; assemblies were held throughout the county in order to gather people's criticisms and proposals. In recent years, under Mayor Magali Quezada, solidarity was introduced as an additional criterion to participatory budgeting in order to address the central government's decision in 2013 to significantly reduce budget assignments to municipalities in a new law regarding territorial organization, autonomy, and decentralization (COOTAD), following the Correa government's push for centralization. The solidarity principle now allows different communities or parishes in Nabón to "lend" parts of their yearly assigned budget to another, in order to make bigger investments of major impact possible where needed. Following the rules of reciprocity, this money will be given back in case of future need to the community who gave it.

Alexandra Ochoa, a municipal delegate who has been active since the beginning of the process, recalls: Of course some people say no, this is mine. This budget is mine and I can define it, not the authorities. So we have had to work and say: OK, this is yours, but let's see, your brother or your neighbor needs it. Sometimes they also say: This year we will not be able to use our share. So to whom can we lend it? [21]

It is striking to see how well informed the inhabitants of Nabón have become with regards to budgetary assignments. They know exactly where there are budget remainders, and discuss their best use with the mayor or in their community. In parallel to this new budgeting process, the municipality has instituted several thematic roundtables on integral health, relations with Nature and biodiversity, tourism and patrimony, economic development, children and youth, and so on, in which individuals have opportunities to become involved.

This new institutionality has stretched national regulations in order to improve local democracy, and as a result the role of the party representatives in the *concejo municipal* has shifted significantly.

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21   Interview with Alexandra Ochoa conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón, March 29, 2017.

Now, instead of being "authorities" who take decisions *for* the people, they can only ratify decisions which have already been made *by* the people at the base level and help implement them: We at the municipal institutions are only executors. (…) We cannot decide one single cent by ourselves. If there is a change in the program or in an infrastructure project, the community assembly decides and their decision is validated by the parish assembly, and they tell us: this is what we have decided. And the council only says if this is technically doable or not. The council only approves.[22]

In this way, specific partisan interests have lost a lot of their influence on the local policy-making process, and *concejo* decisions are generally taken by consensus, as the Mayor explains: At the council, we currently have two more counselors from my party, *Pachakutik*, two from *Alianza País* (the party of the national government) and one from *Avanza*. But the process is so empowered through the participation of the people that there is hardly any possibility to say no to anything. I would say that during the seven years that I have been in charge now, 99 percent of the decisions have been taken unanimously. The issues that do generate controversy are those which come in from the central State, which are imposed by the central government. Like the obligation to take money for garbage collection, for example. But in the end, we again resolved the way in which we would take the money together with the people.

These new instituent practices challenge the very understanding and practice of representative democracy whereby citizens delegate their power or agency to elected representative proxies.

On these grounds, electoral processes also have to meet specific conditions in Nabón: "Many candidates come here and expose their proposals not on the basis of a participatory process, but from their own point of view. And people say: no, not like that. We have already decided what to do and now they come and want to impose this on us."[23] This shows that it is fairly difficult to politically co-opt an empowered community which is used to self-determination.

ELEMENTS OF PLURINATIONALITY

Whilst at the national level, the plurinational state, one of the indigenous movement's main demands, only attained declaratory status when it was introduced as one of the characteristics of the Ecuadorian State in the preamble of the 2008 Constitution, in Nabón, some elements of plurinationality are being put into practice on a local level. As Mayor Quezada explains, "At the beginning, we learned from the indigenous zone how to organize and applied this to the mestizo zone," where it

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22   Interview with Mayor Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Quito, March 23, 2017.

23   Interview with Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Quito, March 23, 2017.

was decided in assemblies that the Comités Promejoras (improvement committees) would be considered as equivalent to the *cabildos* or community governments in the indigenous zone.

For Quezada, one important aspect of plurinationality resides in the importance that is assigned to communitarian assemblies: People know that before a decision is taken over an issue, this issue has to be well debated, the arguments have to be well presented, because they will be responsible for the decision they make. When it is a collective decision, all signs indicate that it will work out.[24]

The assemblies deliberate and decide on a very wide range of issues, including health, security, environment, solidarity, and sometimes religious issues. Quezada also explains how the communitarian logic has served to dismantle clientelist practices that have been normalized over centuries of colonial and then postcolonial rule:

The indigenous, authentically communitarian process, has taught us so much. For example, [the fact] that you cannot manipulate. People go to the assemblies by themselves and they like to go, there is no need to pay them or bring them in order to make them attend. Once I had a problem with a prefect of the province, because he began to offer the people buses for transportation and meals if they attended the provincial parliaments. I told him: No! You are teaching them wrong. The people are empowered; this is about their responsibility with their territory. In Nabón we never give them anything, they assist because they have been entrusted by the community and they consider it an ethical obligation to do the best they can. If a leader doesn't, they remove him.

While mainstream politicians in today's mainstream Andean political culture always act as if public work was their personal gift to the people, and had nothing to do with their social rights, Magali Quezada avoids being personally acknowledged for achievements. The classic signs "This work has been realized by (name of authority)" cannot be found in Nabón County. "Why should I officially inaugurate some work if we all know that it was the local community leader who did all the work, brought the people together?" she asks. These small refusals to comply with the ceremonialism of state power constitute little steps in the path towards de-colonization. Nevertheless, the three big general assemblies that make up the participatory budgeting process are still carried out in a rather traditional way, with the national anthem being sung at the beginning and the authorities sitting on a stage above the general audience accommodated in chairs arranged in rows.

Following the same logic of learning from indigenous practices, *mingas* have been introduced in rural mestizo zones. For all projects carried out in the county, people have to

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24   Interview conducted by Miriam Lang in Quito, March 23, 2017.

provide their workforce while the municipality funds the necessary materials: "That has allowed us to achieve a lot of things," says the Mayor.

Patricio Sagbay lives in Pucallpa, an indigenous community which belongs to the Shiña commune. He is currently responsible for the communitarian irrigation system there and feels real ownership over the Nabón transformation process: The participatory budget departs from our communities. We learn about things and debate in our assemblies. We think this is the correct way; this, to put it briefly, is Sumak Kawsay. The actual administration is excellent; they meet the needs of our communities which we build together with our bases. (…) We now will implement an irrigation project on the basis of the principle of solidarian budgeting (…). We have struggled for 25 years for this project (…) and have finally started to build it ourselves, with shovels in our hands. (…) Now, the participatory budget will make it possible. (…) There are still traces of racism in the central village of Nabón, but we belong to Nabón County and we have to be equal. We are actually managing to assert our self-government in the commune. Although the Correa administration wanted to strip us of some competences, we carried on and we have made them respect us. Not because we are a majority, but on the base of the Constitution. We feel that our *Cabildo* [communitarian government consisting of five people elected by the general assembly each year] is respected as an authority by the mayor, not only as a territorial one, but also one that administrates justice.[25]

While indigenous communitarian justice is only practiced within the indigenous zone of the county, it is noticeable that their decisions are recognized by the local instances of ordinary justice. In Ecuador, the 2008 Constitution recognized the existence of indigenous justice systems, which are often more inclined to reestablish equilibrium and impose reparation instead of punishment. But the Correa government failed to translate this into practice and has blocked anything advancing a respectful and coordinated coexistence of both systems in practice. In the media, indigenous justice is often denigrated in racist terms as a variant of lynch justice, whereas the systematic racism present in ordinary justice is rarely addressed (De Sousa Santos & Grijalva Jiménez, 2012). On these grounds, it is important to point out that the municipal judge of Nabón has officially handed on cases to the indigenous *cabildos* for resolution and, stating a precedent in jurisprudence, has declared himself incompetent at resolving conflicts originating in the realm of the indigenous communes. This even led to a lawsuit being filed against him by the Correa government before he was removed from Nabón.[26]

At the same time, there has been tension for some years now in the indigenous zone of the county around the very core of indigenous communitarian culture and tradition.

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25   Interview with Patricio Sagbay conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on October 1, 2017.

26   Interview with Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Quito on March 23, 2017.

When traveling throughout Nabón, especially through the indigenous zone, one can clearly observe a conflict of values generated by migration. Migrants who live in the US and Spain often send their money to build spacious and luxurious mansions in their home communities, which contrast starkly with the traditional farm houses mainly made of adobe. Curiously, most of these new houses are not inhabited; sometimes they are used to keep small livestock in them, others serve to show off the family's wealth, or they represent an investment, a real-estate asset to inherit and secure the future of their heirs. These architectonical contrasts symbolize a conflict of values between the capitalist value of material accumulation which confers superiority in a society understood as predominantly modern and competitive, and the notion of convivial, harmonious well-being that is at the core of *Buen Vivir*, where material wealth is not the goal once the fulfillment of basic needs is ensured. Migrants who leave their country are normally under social pressure to show their success abroad, in order to prove that the sacrifice the family made was worth it.

In Shiña, one of the indigenous communes, a group of people, many of them returned migrants, are resisting the communitarian organization of everyday life and attempting to assert the modern/western concept of well-being that they have acquired in countries of the Global North. They denominate themselves as *colonos* (settlers), claim to be white and, in their struggle for individual land titles, even question whether Shiña was ever legally a commune with collective land property. This has already resulted in several court cases. Don Segundo Nivelo, one of their leaders, claims individual property rights and does not recognize either the authority of the assembly or of the elected *cabildo*.[27] Other *comuneros* of Shiña state that there have been violent conflicts over the participation in *mingas* and the use of the common highlands. Some central government institutions, such as the Ministry of Social Well-Being, have taken the opportunity to fuel this conflict by supporting the *colonos*, thereby generating a local group loyal to the ruling party Alianza País, in order to neutralize indigenous demands articulated by Pachakutik and to weaken the politically independent process in Nabón (Vega, 2016: p. 190).[28] At the same time, Sergio Morocho also reflects self-critically on the fact that this conflict has not always been managed well by the indigenous community authorities themselves.[29]

These tensions, which appear both in the architectural aesthetics of the indigenous zone and, in the case of Shiña, in the very structure of the commune indicate that, even after the consecration of plurinationality and interculturality as new principles of the Ecuadorian State in the 2008 Constitution and their adoption by the municipal government,

27 Informal conversation with Segundo Nivelo in Cuenca on October 2, 2017

28 Interview with Magali Quezada conducted in Nabón, May 13, 2017

29 Interview with Sergio Morocho conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

the westernizing allure of modern development is not alien to subjectivities in Nabón, where profoundly different understandings of well-being strive for hegemony and cause community conflicts to simmer beneath the surface. The traditional communal authorities have been unable to deal in a constructive way with these cultural changes introduced by migration and can only provide those people concerned with the options of compliance with the traditional rules or expulsion from the commune (Vega, 2016: p. 187). On the other side, the *colonos* perceive the *Buen Vivir* proposed by the *cabildos* as an obstacle to their well-being and to modern progress.

SOCIETAL RELATIONS WITH NATURE

Fernando Vega describes societal relations with Nature in Nabón as follows: For the community, the conservation of Nature is essential to *Buen Vivir*. Nature is directly related to the identity of the community and without it, life is not conceived. One of the obligations that the community has, from this perspective, is to preserve Nature, and therefore the element linked to it in this context: water. The relationship with La Pachamama is part of the identity and constitutes the main food source. (Vega, 2016: p. 86)

Soil fertility restored

REGAINING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

The foremost priority in the context of building self-reliance was the focus on the production of food to meet the community's needs, which necessarily involved caring for Nature. Indeed, the first step entailed recovering soil fertility through agroecological practices and a sustained effort at reforestation.

According to Alexandra Ochoa, people involved in the process have been able to learn from their errors and correct them: We also made some errors. For example at the beginning, we said: Where there is major erosion we have to assign more budget. But then we noted that we were rewarding those who did nothing about the erosion, and so we turned it around: the budget got assigned proportionally to the reforestation efforts. We did a real reforestation campaign, all the population got involved, including municipal employees. The territory was divided: this piece of land has to be reforested by the organization, this by the community, and this by the municipality. And this process is still going on. But the issue was not only recovering the soil, but also recovering customs and traditions, for example starting to use the Andean seeds we had here again. (...) This is why today, Nabón has been declared cultural patrimony of Ecuador.[30]

The second step was the creation of several producers' associations for vegetables and small livestock, again mainly driven by women. These associations were then supported by the local government in their search for new regional markets and the development of collective strategies of commercialization for their produce. An important step in this process was the creation of a local organic brand, *Nabón Productos Limpios*, which added value to the local produce. Organic strawberries, vegetables, and herbal teas from Nabón have gained a reputation in Azuay. Furthermore, traditional local food like guinea pig, the traditional *chicha*-drink made out of corn or local tequila distilled from agave has acquired a new status in the minds of the local population in relation to imported modern processed food. Finally, to safeguard a sustainable transfer of knowledge about the technology that ensures a harmonious relation with Nature in production processes, the municipality has supported the creation of an ecological agricultural school.

Here again, the specific logic of local savings associations has proved helpful. Within a project, each person involved can participate with a contribution as low as 1 USD a month for a loan of 200 USD. What makes the Nabón experiment so interesting is that the projects funded were collective projects, which differ from traditional micro-loans given to individuals. Each savings association – today there are more than 90 throughout the county, mainly women-led – decides on the interest rates which the participating people consider suitable. These collective loans also have effects beyond the expected economic benefits as they enable a collective venture where solidarity can flourish. For example, women working together in the San Juan Bautista farming association explained they can easily organize child care within their group because they are working together and can rely on each other. The value behind this alternative

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30   Interview with Alexandra Ochoa conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on March 29, 2017..

funding process was "to connect people instead of connecting capital."[31] These resilient, small, local, and organic production projects in Nabón are an effective alternative to export-oriented industrial monocultures, which tend to drive people out of rural areas.

Another crucial issue related to food sovereignty was the expansion of the domestic drinking water system, which helped women gain more independence from their reproductive tasks. On average, the rural women of Nabón especially save two hours per day since they no longer have to go and fetch water for the house. As mentioned above, today 97 percent of households in the county have access to water from the mains (Quezada, 2017).

As Magali Quezada rightfully points out: "When a population is poor and weak, it is easily influenced by outsiders."[32] Beyond official poverty indicators generally based on income and some international standards regarding housing etc., which often do not align with local ideas of living, the Mayor points out that for the people of Nabón, getting out of poverty was about having "enough food to eat; this will allow us to be in adequate health later, and to commercialize these crops (regionally), and at the same time put them at the disposal of the community, to trade them."

While Quezada supports financial assistance of the elderly, she is critical of some measures the central government has taken around the "eradication of poverty." She says that in Nabón the *Bono de Desarrollo Humano*, the conditional cash transfer of 50 USD which is given directly by the central government to families considered to be poorest, creates unnecessary dependencies and serves primarily clientelist political interests. The main divergence between a *Buen Vivir* process and centralized redistributive programs under the welfare state lies precisely in their creation or avoidance of dependencies. According to Quezada, "other actions should be taken in the case of people who are at a good age to work. We have proof that an organic farm which is well administered and, from an agroecological point of view, gets sufficient technical support can provide a family with a monthly income of 600 or 700 USD ,which allows it to live well in Nabón."[33]

Today in Nabón there are 70 agroecological associations which have frequently asked the central state to change its agricultural policies. Only 24 percent of Nabón's inhabitants state that they use pesticides, while almost 80 percent use organic fertilizers (Morocho, 2013: p. 21). Government policies are aimed at agroindustrial exportation

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31 Discussion held by Magali Quezada on the occasion of the field visit of the Global Working Group Beyond Development to the municipality of Nabón on May 13, 2017.

32 Discussion held by Magali Quezada on the occasion of the field visit of the Global Working Group Beyond Development to the municipality of Nabón on May 13, 2017.

33 Interview with Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Quito on March 23, 2017.

crops and are in no way concerned with supporting the dignified existence of rural people on their land (Muñoz Jaramillo, 2014: p. 14). The institutions of the central state often intervene to recommend a certain crop that supposedly obtains good prices on the world market. For example in Nabón, at a particular moment the Ministry of Agriculture pushed quinoa crops, which then failed to find a market. With the help of the people, the municipality decided to buy the local quinoa production and give it specifically to the mothers of malnourished children, with good results for the children's health. This successful resolution attracted the attention of the Ministry of Health, which was quick to take credit for the program – highly ironic given that it had only been an emergency intervention to minimize the consequences of a failed agricultural policy.

Attaining food sovereignty on these terms is not only about leaving poverty behind; it is a way of de-commodifying food and returning it to its original purpose – nutrition, not profit – and of decoupling agriculture from the neoliberalized global market. The pressure to produce for exportation easily leads to interference by International Finance Institution's (IFIs), like the Interamerican Development Bank or the World Bank, with their neoliberal loan packages.[34] Once the population of Nabón realized they could once again exist relying on their own efforts, means, and environment, they had learned that they did not need the kind of loan which would force them to implement a neoliberal structural adjustment. Luckily in Nabón, the Swiss cooperation allowed a cash flow without intervening into the decision-making process, which marked a significant difference to the conditions of an IFI's package deal.

By prioritizing food sovereignty and nutrition, the local communities of Nabón have broken with the capitalistic logic of money-making. Rather than taking a gamble on the hypothetic trickledown effect of market-based indicators such as growth, the affected population took control over the decision-making process of how to escape poverty and achieve a dignified existence. They ignored outside market forces as well as the imperative of macroeconomic growth, and instead grew their own food and reverted to their former autonomous existence. Nabón's transformative experience proves that resistance to neoliberalism can be effective when the power (of decision) is not transferred to representatives, but exercised directly and collectively by the concerned population, and when the role of institutions is limited to that of a facilitating and executive agent. Once the power of decision-making is transferred to a representative entity – through a political party or a civil society platform – the population will always have to rely on the moral quality of the representatives to ensure its subsistence.

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34   On this issue, there is little doubt that President Correa's bold rejection of the IMF and the World Bank at the beginning of his mandate sent a positive message that has set the tone for the nation's independence – although since then, both organizations have returned to the country and are recognized by the Citizen Revolution's government. This notwithstanding, Correa's agrarian policies have largely pursued the same goals as the IFIs themselves: to phase out small-scale, family agriculture and integrate those workers into the larger cycles of capital accumulation.

It goes without saying that the further away the decision-making process is from the affected population, the weaker the resistance to neoliberalism. In the case of Nabón, the population not only owns its decision-making process, but these decisions are taken and instigated from Nabón, not in Quito, Bern, or Washington DC. From a geographical point of view, since Nabón is a remote rural area, there was little competition of ideas that could have opposed this new social dynamic.

DEFENSE OF WATER SOURCES AND FORESTS; STRUGGLES AGAINST MINING

One central aspect of the strategy of regaining food sovereignty in order to strengthen the organization of communities has been the defense of water sources and forests. In Nabón, like in other parts of the Ecuadorian Andes, the *páramo* ecosystems constitute, together with forests, the most important water storage reserves. In Nabón County, according to the territorial development plan of 2014, 32 percent of the surface corresponds to fragile, but ecologically highly valuable ecosystems like *páramos* (PYDLOS, 2014: p. 90).

There have been several socio-ecological conflicts over the protection of *páramos* and forests in Nabón County in recent years. Firstly, an important share of the territory has been given to mining concessions: there are concessions for metallic mining, mainly gold and silver, as well as for kaolin – used in ceramics production – and construction materials. According to information obtained from the municipality, a total of eighteen mining concessions were allocated between 2002 and 2014, the most dangerous one concerning the *Cerro del Mozo*, the highest mountain of the region, which provides both irrigation channels and drinking water to several communities. According to Remigio Capelo, an anti-mining activist from the community of Ñamarín, which belongs to the parish of Cochapata, the project aims to remove the whole top of the mountain.[35] The concessioner is Minera Cachabí Ltd., which, according to official data from the US Securities and Exchange Commission, is operating as part of a deal with the transnational Iamgold Corporation. In April 2016, the municipality invited Minera Cachabí to explain the project and its environmental impact to the population. Company representatives did attend the meeting, arguing that the project's socialization was in any case mandatory, according to Ecuador's environmental laws. In response, on August 19, 2017, the municipality issued a local resolution which declared "the territory of Nabón County, its páramos and fragile ecosystems (...) free of metallic mining in concordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador." The same document requests the Ministry of Mining to stop any authorization process regarding the *Cerro del Mozo* mining project as well as related contracts, and to suspend any metallic mining concession in Nabón

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35   Interview with Don Remigio Capelo conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 20, 2017.

County, arguing that they are mostly located in protected conservation areas or archeological reserves which belong to the cultural patrimony of Nabón (GAD Nabón, 2017).

In December 2014, the municipality issued a local law declaring a significant part of the county's highlands a "municipal protection zone." Significantly, this *ordenanza* forbids the extraction of non-renewable resources, while it allows human activities related to ecotourism, science, forest management, and sustainable agriculture. Furthermore, it claims to revive ancestral knowledges regarding ways to work the land in an organic way, to manage native species and non-timber products as well as to implement diversified crops. In contrast with many conservation initiatives or national parks across the world, this local law does not exclude the local population on behalf of the Rights of Nature, but on the contrary respects both their traditional activities and knowledges (GAD Nabón, 2014).

These measures can be read as a preventive reaction to another conflict which occurred in March 2008. At the time, the mining company Minera Explorsur S.A., property of the Eljuri family, one of Ecuador's richest and most powerful families, who own an economic group of the same name, began to introduce machinery into the *páramo* above Cochapata parish for the purpose of exploration activities. The people of Cochapata parish, who depend on this *páramo* for their drinking and irrigation water supply, first tried to negotiate with the Eljuris. But when this did not yield any results, in response to what they considered an invasion, about 70 local people went up to the mountains and burned down the machinery. Seven community leaders were sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for sabotage by the provincial Justice Court of Azuay in April 2010 – in spite of a general amnesty for environmental defenders issued by the Constituent Assembly in June 2008, three months after the conflict. Remigio Capelo and three other men, all claiming they had not even been on the spot on the day of the sabotage, had to hide in the mountains for two years, with significant health consequences, before the National Parliament granted them amnesty in December 2011 (INREDH, 2011; El Mercurio, 2011; Campaña Defensores, 2011).[36]

The criminalization of protest has been among the defining characteristics of the ten years of government under Rafael Correa. It has been directed especially against people and organizations who defend the right of La Pachamama. While in the early years, an old law which had been passed under military rule was used indiscriminately to categorize protest actions such as road blocks as "terrorism and sabotage," from 2014 a new, rather punitive penal code still guaranteed a rather broad definition of terrorism. This, alongside the term "rebellion," has been a charge frequently used by the state against social protesters. At the same time, strategies that have proven successful in neighboring Colombia, such

36   Interview with Don Remigio Capelo conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on March 29, 2017

as carrying out local referenda in order to rule out mining mega-projects democratically, have not been respected by the Correa government, as the case of Quimsacocha in the neighboring county of Girón, also in Azuay province, proved in 2011.[37]

Currently, there is still much uncertainty about the future of the water reserves around the *Cerro del Mozo*. Ecuador's new president Lenin Moreno, who came into office on May 24, 2017 and soon made clear certain differences between him and his predecessor Rafael Correa, wants to carry out a referendum which includes a question about the prohibition of mining in protected areas. Another hurdle is the *Codigo Organico del Ambiente* law – the Organic Code of the Environment – which currently allows the environmental authority to move or change the protected area limits or even to change their category. Nevertheless, there are many definitions of protected areas in Ecuador which frequently collide with each other, as well as strong economic interests around mining, and whether the mining threat to Nabón County remains or not will depend primarily on the concrete relations between such forces.

STRUGGLES AROUND CULTURE, KNOWLEDGE, AND EDUCATION
AN ECOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGES

The transformation process of Nabón has a crucial cultural dimension. We have already stressed the importance of the production of a new narrative which has generated more self-esteem within a population that had always been despised for its rurality, its poverty, and in part for its indigenousness. During Amelia Erráez' term as mayor, these people began to feel appreciated, that they themselves had something important to contribute to their collective well-being.

In addition to the re-evaluation of ancestral knowledges regarding agriculture, health, and relations with Nature, Erráez recalls how the informal learning spaces worked at the beginning of the process: At night we gathered together like we were at school, with a blackboard, the counselors of the Nabón project, and the technicians of the municipality. We gathered together and analyzed what had to be done. René Unda was very important in this; he provided orientation, he was the strategist in some way. Once we had reached a consensus, the technicians learned how to implement it. Once they had learned, they would go out into the communities and teach the people. It was rather complicated. Universities do not teach engineers and technical professionals how to build social bonds

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37   In Quimsacocha, in response to a proposed gold-mining project promoted as "strategic" by the Correa government, 92 percent of the local population voted against mining in water sources on the occasion of a locally organized referendum in 2011. This vote was ignored, and a fresh attempt in 2015 to organize a new referendum which would be officially validated by the central government's institutions has still not received the green light from the Constitutional Court. See http://www.larepublica.ec/blog/opinion/2011/10/10/la-consulta-de-quimsacocha/ and https://lahora.com.ec/noticia/1101856741/noticia.

with people. They are used to being cold, far away from the people. It was rather difficult for them to learn a different way. (…) We had to insist on them accepting that scientific knowledge is exactly as important as practical knowledge, that neither of them is worth more. That we should not provide solutions but leave the people themselves with the questions they were raising. (…) Instead of saying that what people were doing was wrong, they would learn from them and simply suggest that they also try out other ways – and then together, they would evaluate which way had worked out better.[38]

Municipal orchid garden with over 80 varieties of orchids, Nabón

The base of knowledge on which the transformation of Nabón was built could be described as an ecology of knowledges which combined traditional with modern, and scientific with experience-based knowledges, as well as formal with informal education, without establishing hierarchies between them.

During the time of Amelia Erráez, the municipality created a "Human Talent Center" which offered a wide range of training programs. According to Ochoa: We have also succeeded in teaching people more skills, in music, dance, but also in computing and finance, as well as basic entrepreneurial skills, in what we called a human talent center. Some young men and women from here have even managed to be admitted to the University in Cuenca and we already have several professionals from here; some of them work for the Municipality. Today, if you meet a young man or woman from here in Cuenca and ask them where they are from, they say proudly 'from Nabón,' whereas

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38   Interview with Amelia Erráez conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 18, 2017.

before, they always said 'from Cuenca.' Now we have a new motto, which says: 'Creating the future,' because this is what we are doing.[39]

OBSTACLES IN FORMAL PUBLIC EDUCATION

Concerning formal public education, access to higher education represents one of the greatest challenges in a country where it is still an exception for students of rural areas to get admitted to public university.[40] To address this obstacle in young people's lives, the municipality worked around a law which prevents it from developing educational policies and signed a contract with Santa Ana Corporation, a private company specialized in virtual education, in August 2015, a year in which not one single student from Nabón had been able to gain entry to the nearest public university in Cuenca. The objective is to strengthen the capacities of Nabón's baccalaureate absolvents to enable them to pass the national exam that grants them admission to public universities. As the virtual classes take place in the afternoon, outside school hours, there is no interference with the formal educational process. Thus, the initiative can even be carried out in coordination with the Ministry of Education and the student's parents. From 2015 to 2017, 300 students participated in the program. An evaluation of the outcomes was still underway at the time of this article's completion.

Additionally, centralized state educational policies of the Correa government have posed a threat to the sustainable construction of interculturality and plurinationality, central features of the transformation of Nabón. In spite of the fact that the new education law passed in 2011 is called an "intercultural education law," it has largely put an end to the very rich intercultural and bilingual education that had started in the 1970s in those regions of Ecuador with a large indigenous population. But with the new law, "what were bilingual intercultural schools today have become normal educational centers, which do not value the traditions," as Ochoa states for Nabón. As a result, some youths from the indigenous zone do not value them either.[41] Initially, the law claimed to "mainstream" interculturality, but it has mainly caused it to disappear. As everybody has to be intercultural now, no specific culture was able to sustain itself anywhere, and Spanish became the official language of public education once again.

Alexandra Ochoa, herself a mestizo woman, explains what consequences this had for Nabón: While in the mestizo zone we had normal education, in the indigenous zone we

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39   Interview with Alexandra Ochoa conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on March 29, 2017.

40   According to the Mayor in the interview conducted by Miriam Lang on March 23, 2017 in Quito, a baseline study carried out by Santa Ana Corporation states that at the University of Cuenca 98 percent of students come from urban areas and only 2 percent from rural zones. At the national level, while before the Citizen Revolution in 2006 only 7 percent of university students were from rural backgrounds, in 2014 this proportion was slightly higher at 9 percent.

41   Interview with Alexandra Ochoa conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on March 29, 2017

had intercultural bilingual education. This was where we strengthened their language, customs and traditions, and culture. But with the new law, all of this has been leveled. There are no more bilingual schools, all schools are now called 'educational centers' and that's it. So now we are in the process of losing things, because the culture of our peoples is about organization and solidarity. Now there are just normal schools which do not value their culture, where only Spanish is spoken, even if in the textbook there are maybe two pages in kichwa. This is fine; but it just isn't valued. This has brought problems, because the young people of the indigenous zone do not value their own culture anymore. We have done surveys and 2 percent of them already define themselves as mestizos, they are not indigenous anymore. (…) Some young people, when they are asked 'what is it that you like least about your community?' the answer is: *the mingas*[42]. The *minga* is such an important communitarian cultural process. This is the result of the encounter between the modern world and our world here.[43]

In bilingual communitarian schools, teachers were accountable not only to the parents of their pupils, but also to the community assembly and directives, and they played a much more important role within the social fabric of the community than a purely educational one. In 1988, the Ecuadorian government officially recognized these bilingual indigenous communitarian schools, and from then on they were co-managed between the Ministry and the indigenous organizations of each territory. This "intercultural bilingual education system" enjoyed relative autonomy with the capacity to design its own curricula, produce its own educational materials according to each language and context, and it had also set up its own teacher-training system. At both the regional and national level, there was much deliberation around educational issues, and the system became a widely known example of successful interculturality throughout Latin America. At the same time, these intercultural schools were not exempt from criticism since they were severely underfinanced, their management was often chaotic, and sometimes used for personal favors (Lang, 2017: p. 99 ff.).

The 2011 education law claimed to put the system in order and returned all powers to the central state under the auspices of a "return of the state" policy often lauded as an anti-neoliberal strategy by the Correa government. Firstly, the law ousted indigenous organizations from the co-management of the intercultural education system. Most indigenous teachers were dismissed, some for political reasons, the majority because they lacked formal qualifications like a university degree, which were now mandatory in the context of Correa's "meritocratic" system. As a consequence, many indigenous children now have mestizo teachers from anywhere in the country who

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42   Collective, unpaid community work, normally carried out on Sunday mornings, after which people share some food and spend time together.

43   Interview conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón, March 29, 2017

neither understand nor adapt very well to indigenous cultural realities, which again are often considered merely something to be overcome. Thousands of small intercultural community schools were shut down because a new centralized model of Millennium Schools was now prioritized by the Correa government.

Nabón was chosen to host one of these Millennium Schools: a centralized, very well-equipped, large concrete infrastructure which would bring together children from all over the county. Nevertheless, at the time this article was under completion, the site for the construction had only been leveled, while newly elected President Moreno had already declared that he was not going to continue the Millennium School model – leaving Nabón's educational future uncertain.

A former education minister, Rosa Maria Torres, believes that the Correa government has made public investment in educational infrastructure a priority because it is easy to show in numbers. But it has neglected all pedagogic innovation and missed an opportunity to transform the pupil-teacher relationship, which remains vertical, authoritarian, and anti-emancipatory (Torres, 2017) – and often racist.

Mayor Magali Quezada describes how the modernization of public education affects the rhythms and patterns of the reproduction of social life and how this has generated resistance within the indigenous zone of Nabón: That sense of a community school living together with the community no longer exists. Because the school was an important part of the community and the community was an important part of the school. Now, the children have to go a long way to their classroom; they have started to use modern systems like a school bus that picks them up from their homes. Before, they just walked to the school at the center of the community. The sense of community is disappearing because they send them to the center of the county now. They are centralizing everything. Now there is one big school at the center of the county with more than 600 pupils. They regroup them all in the same package; many small schools have been shut down. There are no more intercultural teachers. (…) People resist, and at least this process has been stopped here. The plan was to shut down more than forty schools, but this has been stopped by many *compañeros* who resisted. It has been a rather unequal struggle; we have three *compañeros* who have court sentences for blocking the road, two are in jail, one of them is defending himself from abroad.[44]

Since the municipality lost its influence on the formal education system, it has managed to address this issue of the loss of identity among young people by designing a youth project

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44 Interview conducted in Quito, of March 23, 2017. On April 28, 2017, Silvio Morocho, one of the peasants of the indigenous zone of Nabón incriminated as a "terrorist" for taking part in a road block, was released, while the others still had to complete a 10-month jail sentence. Their incarceration was not the result of a protest against education policies, but against a tax reform which would have taken funds away from the provincial government (see https://www.elmercurio.com.ec/606477-lider-indigena-acusado-de-terrorismo-dejo-la-carcel/).

that will take place in their spare time, outside school hours. These efforts aim to address the conflict between a formal education system that stresses the benefits of western-style modernization and a community culture that insists on the importance of tradition and a certain degree of decoloniality through a decoupling from the dynamics of modernization.[45]

Alexandra Ochoa describes: Recently we opened a branch of the *Casa de la Cultura* in Nabón. There, young people from the mestizo and from the indigenous zone work together, also with the elderly because here, we value their experience very much. They organize dances and entertainment activities – all this is culture – in order to attract children to the process. (...) There is the official council of children and youth, but we want to involve the children actively in our process, socially and culturally. So we invented a project about writing tales and legends from Nabón. For three months of the year, the school children collect tales and legends from the elderly and write them down. And then there are prizes for the winners. We also gave a prize to the winning school; they could win a new sports court or something like that, but since the new law on territorial organization, COOTAD, we as a Municipality are not allowed to interfere with the schools anymore. There has been some partisan jealousy; they say that this is only the competence of the Ministry. (…) But they still allow us to carry out the contest and give prizes to the children.

In 2016, the best tales and legends from the last ten annual contests were published as a book. According to Juana Morocho, an elderly indigenous community leader from Pucallpa in the commune of Shiña, relationships between generations are imperative for the sustainability of *Buen Vivir* as it encourages people to take pride in and defend the community's own cultural, political, and spiritual episteme. In a powerful act of resistance, on the occasion of the Global Working Group's visit to Nabón, Mama Juana explained that there is no word for "development" in kichwa. What her community needs, she went on, is not development, but Sumak Kawsay.

BUEN VIVIR: A CONTESTED CONCEPT

Buen Vivir – Sumak Kawsay, or living well – began its journey around the world following its constitutionalization in 2008, inspiring numerous struggles and promising, in the eyes of some, an answer to the civilizational crisis affecting Ecuador and elsewhere. In the meantime, in Ecuador, the indigenous concept underwent a thorough process of expropriation and resignification.

The following quotation exemplifies the expectations that emerged around this paradigm some years ago: In the same way that the plurinational State is the alternative to the liberal contractuality of the modern State, and interculturality is the condition for a society to be able to recognize itself in the differences that constitute it; Sumak Kawsay is the

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45   Interview with Alexandra Ochoa conducted in Nabón, March 29, 2017.

alternative to the capitalist mode of production, distribution and consumption. (...) Sumak Kawsay also poses a different form of relationship between human beings, in which selfish individualism must submit to a principle of social responsibility and ethical commitment, and a relationship with Nature in which it is recognized as a fundamental part of human sociality. So far, it is the only coherent discourse and practice that can stop the predatory and inhuman drifts of capitalist accumulation, which at the rate they advance become a threat to human life on the planet (Pablo Dávalos, quoted in Prada, 2013: p. 45).

At first, the introduction of these concepts to the constitution of 2008 was celebrated as a step of historical importance, by the indigenous movement as well, as evidenced by the following quotation from the Amazonian Kichwa leader Mónica Chuji, who was also Secretary of Communication at the beginning of Rafael Correa's first administration: It is the first time that a notion which denotes an ancestral coexistence practice respectful of Nature, societies, and human beings, has been positioned visibly in the political debate and strongly inscribed in the horizon of human possibilities (Chuji, 2010 [2014]: p. 232).

This achievement should not be minimized. Many authors in later years took the 2008 Constitution as the standard against which they measured the subsequent implementation of Living Well or its gradual reinterpretation in the successive Development Plans – or "*Buen Vivir*" Plans –, instituted by the institutions of the Correist State (see for example Gudynas and Acosta, 2011; Vega, 2014).

However, in retrospect it should be noted that the Sumak Kawsay paradigm had already undergone its initial resignification when it was enshrined in the specific format of a "Political Constitution of the State," which has a specific function in the modern liberal State. It was elaborated in a very specific context with a pre-established structure, within the framework of representative politics, which of course is always the result of a correlation of political forces at a given moment. In the 2008 Constitution, Sumak Kawsay, which originally was clearly conceived as an *alternative to development* and even a different civilizational horizon, comes to simply coexist with development in a text where, paradoxically, development has a central place. In the constitutional text of 2008, *Buen Vivir* is conceived as the "paradigm of life towards which 'development' should be oriented" (Cortez, 2011). Unfortunately, the doxa of modernization and progress that has underpinned development theory continues in force, reflecting the patronizing and patriarchal visions of the specific coalition of people who formulated *Buen Vivir* as a state policy (Manosalvas, 2014).

Over time, in the process of the Citizen Revolution, the narrative of Sumak Kawsay as an alternative civilizational horizon was blurred and resignified, while the account of modernization that leads to well-being was enshrined as a principle of government action (Walsh, 2015).

In an apparent attempt to contain the potential of *Buen Vivir*, President Correa was swift to claim ownership of the transformative experience by institutionalizing it at the central government level, for example with the creation of a Secretary of *Buen Vivir*, a role which had a merely symbolic function. In contrast, the National Plan for *Buen Vivir* 2013-2017[46] was a central instrument in the recovery of the state's regulatory capacity in its move towards Neo-keynesianism. Its very creation by the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES) was a process precisely at odds with the core principles of *Buen Vivir*, since it was drafted using a top-down approach and was closely supervised by government experts.

The resignification of *Buen Vivir* took place through two interrelated movements: on the one hand, the subjection of Sumak Kawsay to the logic of the workings of the liberal state. Through its translation into the language and structure of Development Plans – soon to be called "national plans for *Buen Vivir*" – with their objectives, indicators, and goals, and its implementation by a management that prioritized efficiency and performance (as a requirement so that the Correist political project could provide evidence of its successes) – Sumak Kawsay was domesticated by the metric mindset and the technocratic obsession with representing reality preeminently in measurable numbers (Moreno, Speich, & Fuhr, 2015). At the same time, it was stripped of its meaning, which was rooted in an indigenous episteme and ontology, and of its radically different understanding of socio-political relations and social relations with Nature, which presents a model of horizontal solidarity, of nurturing and regenerating life, which is not limited to the world of the human, but includes all other beings of the natural world.

Of course, it would be a mistake to expect Sumak Kawsay, which forms a transformative horizon, to appear in its "pure" state in all indigenous discourses, or to translate into practice without causing tensions or contradictions within communities. Rather, it coexists and merges with Western narratives, just as the resistant practices of many indigenous communities coexisted for centuries with practices of colonial domination and with the multiple onslaughts of developmental cooperation, such as public education. Thus, we can find statements such as CONAIE's proposal to the 2007 Constituent Assembly, in which the "equitable development of the whole of Ecuadorian society" is an objective to be achieved; or by leader Blanca Chancoso, claiming the "development of peoples in diversity" (Capitán et al., 2014: p. 226), just as we find other contributions such as the Amazonian Kichwa leaders Monica Chuji (ibid.: p. 231ff.) or Carlos Viteri Gualinga (2002) that clearly define development and Sumak Kawsay as polar opposites. According to Luis Macas, some have even

46   National Secretary of Planning and Development, Government of the Republic of Ecuador Development Plan / National Plan for Good Living, 2013-2017 http://www.planificacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/12/Buen-Vivir-ingles-web-final-completo.pdf [accessed July 13, 2017].

attempted to define Sumak Kawsay as a Kichwa translation of the term development, thereby completely ignoring the fact that the two concepts originate in modes of living and historical experiences within completely different epistemes (ibid.: p. 183). What matters here is not the "purity" of indigenous discourse or practice, but the orientation it can provide. In other words, it can serve as an indication of the particular direction a social process is taking, whether it be towards a deepening of the civilizational crisis or towards alternative horizons.

The fact that, in the context of state discourse, *Buen Vivir* has gradually become associated with development in the official discourse and public policies of Ecuador has had fundamental consequences: 'living in harmony' was undermined by a different philosophy of life, that of 'living to work and to develop,' in which 'development' becomes the objective and life is at the service of development. (Mignolo, 2011: p. 313) This resignification has been so successful that today authors like David Cortez identify this government version of *Buen Vivir* as a "governing device," a "set of practices intended for the political management of a population's life," or a "technology of governance that inserts local practices into global policies" in the context of a "biocapitalism," which also integrates "the knowledge traditionally excluded from the dominant knowledge regime" (Cortez, 2014: p. 135ff.).

Understood in this way, Living Well has lost all of its transformative potential. After ten years of Correism, this version of *Buen Vivir* is the one that sadly dominates Ecuadorian discourse. Nevertheless, in many territories *other* practices, relationships, and ways of life still persist, sustained particularly by those who initially shaped Sumak Kawsay as a civilizing alternative in different ways, depending on whether they were campesino, kichwa, or from other indigenous communities. Nabón, a rural county at the edge of the country, is one of those territories that contest the meaning of *Buen Vivir* in practice.

For Mayor Magali Quezada, *Buen Vivir* means: Life in the community, socio-activity, cooperativism, the relationship between the mestizo and the indigenous, the recovery of those good ancestral practices we had, because it means going back to the good times, of course good times in the community, when decisions were taken collectively in the attempt to effectively include all sectors. It doesn't mean just looking at how we give the poor more.

Fernando Vega conducted a study over several years on the perceptions and discourses around *Buen Vivir* in Nabón, which included numerous workshops with different population groups from Nabón carried out to investigate their views on Sumak Kawsay.

He explains: There is no such thing as individual happiness; there is [a sense of] community welfare. For the community to be in 'good health,' three concepts that constitute it must be strengthened: identity as a community, community work, and the integration of all its members. (…) Recovering customs and traditions is a priority for the community,

as it reinforces the bonds between its members. Having a common identity is imperative in the fight for common goals. (Vega, 2016: p. 83)

At the same time, *Buen Vivir* is an integral concept that combines material, cultural, spiritual, and subjective dimensions, both at the individual and at the collective level (Vega, 2016: p. 51). But most importantly, Vega insists that there is not *one* model of *Buen Vivir*, and that the discourses and construction processes of the different forms of *Buen Vivir* are dynamic processes structured by history, territory, and culture, as well as through the interaction of organized and non-organized civil society with state actors at different levels (Vega, 2016: p. 181).

PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES
RELATIONS WITH THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

The county of Nabón is peripheral in the Ecuadorian geography of power. Perhaps this status has provided one of the conditions of possibility for a local process that was able to concentrate on its own highly localized needs while the main areas of the country underwent a systematic process of mainstream western modernization. Some of the achievements of Nabón stand in clear contrast to the politics of the central government during the 10 years of Rafael Correa's government. While at the national level citizen participation was institutionalized, channeled into bureaucratic procedures and redefined in a rather passive, acclamatory way, Nabón sought to deepen and extend the possibilities for decision-making from below. While the government in Quito quickly identified the indigenous movement as a political enemy and ever since has undertaken everything to weaken it, in Nabón the alliance between indigenous and mestizo parts of the county has been at the core of its achieved transformation and stands up to the present day.

This contrast, in addition to the fact that the local government of Nabón had always been sympathetic with Pachakutik, a political party rivaling Correa's Alianza País, has led to rather tense relations between the local and the national governments since the 2000 elections. Mayor Magali Quezada reports that she cannot count the obstacles the central government has put in the way of the Nabón process. She recalls how she has been directly turned away by employees of the Ministry of Public Works in Quito for not being a member of Alianza País.[47] At the same time, her municipality has enjoyed special attention from the central auditing institution, the Contraloría: In eight years, it was subjected to a total of thirty-five audits, which kept both her and her staff busy, preventing them from promoting more transformative activities. [48]

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[47]   Interview with Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 20, 2017.

[48]   Several months after the end of the Correa administration, it is clear that the Contraloría not only obeyed political orders from the executive, but was also involved in massive corruption. The head of the institution, Carlos Polit, fled to Miami in June 2017 when the investigations into the corruption scandal around the Brasilian construction firm *Odebrecht* began.

The relations between the local and the national level have been shaped by the politics of scale, where the ways in which local, national, or global scales are constituted and how they interact with each other are "essentially determined by power relations and their institutionalization. (…) the strategies of the various actors are precisely aimed at strengthening or weakening the corresponding scales according to their own interests. [Moreover], every scale must be understood as a *field of forces* which is characterized by often overlapping constellations of interests and power" (Brand et al., 2008). In the case of Nabón, it was COOTAD, the law of territorial organization issued in 2013, which deprived local governments of many legislative powers that would have been important for Nabón's multidimensional transformation process: Education, health, all policies regarding production or economic development, and policies regarding roads. It not only reallocated powers between municipalities and provincial governments, but also prohibited municipalities from making donations to projects in their territory. Only ministries and institutions of the central government can make such donations, which, since they are not subject to close citizen participation, may open up the gates for clientelism.

Besides the restructuring of local powers, another obstacle was the refusal by local branches of central government institutions to co-operate with mechanisms created during the Nabón process and to respect it as a valid political process in itself. For instance, one of the important qualities of the Nabón process was that all institutions – local ones and branch offices of central government institutions – sat together in an interinstitutional coordination committee, in order to avoid unnecessary double work

From left to right: Indigenous community leaders Estefania Lalvay and Juana Morocho with working group member Ashish Kothari (India)

or contradictory measures within the territory. But the Correa government institutions abandoned this example of cooperation in 2010.

The "itinerant cabinet" sessions introduced by Correa, in which he and his ministers would carry out their sessions in some remote location on national territory every month in order to get closer to the people and enhance their confidence in public institutions, would also be perceived as unwelcome intrusions into the longstanding, carefully balanced process of Nabón. As Quezada recalls: "They just invited everybody to express what they wanted and responded on the spot. This is no way of planning. They would ignore all the requirements for coordination with the territory or local institutions, and make all kinds of populist promises."[49]

RESILIENCE AND THE DURABILITY OF CHANGE

In retrospect, the territorial process of multidimensional transformation initiated in the mid-1990s in Nabón has proved resilient to many economic, cultural, and political obstacles and adversities. It resisted the profound economic crisis of 1999/2000 as well as the aggressive politics of modernization and political control under Rafael Correa and – to a certain extent – the imaginaries of well-being and success that were introduced to the territory through migration. While the external conditions for its replicability have been rather hostile, the transformation has proven to be durable. It has also managed to sustain patterns for the material and symbolic reproduction of life that differ profoundly from the capitalist/modern/western standard of material accumulation – redefining societal relations with nature around food sovereignty and the protection of water and forests instead of the sole imperative of productivity. It has succeeded in marginalizing racism, in giving indigenous people a real sense of inclusion while respecting their traditional ways of organizing, establishing justice, and managing property. It has created a general understanding of women's multiple productive, political, financial, and cultural responsibilities within the population, which has influenced gender relations in the territory and established a trend towards de-patriarchalization. It has also strengthened subjectivities with a sense of community, collectivity, and solidarity, in opposition to the ontological claims of *homo oeconomicus*, the self-interested rational individual. It has managed to establish an ecology of knowledges which has boosted people's self-esteem. Finally, through its specific system of participatory budgeting, it has constructed a method of material redistribution that disseminates power to the smallest entities, the communities, in contrast with the centralizing redistribution pattern that extractivism generates. It has managed to sustain a process of progressive self-reliance and strengthening democracy; it has largely marginalized private local *potentates* and has restored in both indigenous and mestizo people a sense of dignity, of community, and, above all, the capacity to directly determine important aspects of their own lives. For inhab-

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49   Interview with Magali Quezada conducted by Miriam Lang in Nabón on September 20, 2017.

itants of Nabón, *Buen Vivir* not only represents a material post-development alternative; it is a philosophy of life and consciousness beyond the world that revolves around profit. It is also a political tool of resistance against western modernism and an opportunity to show how communities can co-exist thanks to ancestral culture and knowledge. The main village of Nabón is one of the few in Ecuador which has not replaced its traditional architecture of houses with wooden porches and balconies with concrete and colored glass. Today on its streets, mostly traditional handmade food, such as wheat tortilla with cheese, is on sale.

The spiritual dimension has played an important role, particularly in the transformation of the relationship with Nature. It would be simplistic to believe that the numerous projects initiated by the municipalities and the inhabitants of Nabón involving irrigation or agro-forestry were simply means of feeding the community. From a *Buen Vivir* perspective – which breaks with anthropocentrism – these projects aim to care for Nature and all living beings, humans and non-humans. Thus, irrigation and reforestation contribute to enabling conditions on the ground for the reproduction of life to flourish and for Nature to regenerate in harmony with all living beings of the past, present, and future. Catherine Walsh, a decolonial scholar with a long history in Ecuador, reminds us that *Buen Vivir* denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. This notion is part and parcel of the cosmovision, cosmology, or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala but also, and in a somewhat different way, of the descendants of the African Diaspora. (Walsh, 2010: p. 18)

At the same time, there are of course multiple factors that make the Nabón process vulnerable: The cycles and logics of electoral democracy, which have not only driven the two mayors apart[50], but will open up a new competition with open results for the continuity of the process in 2019; the dependency on foreign funding, either from the central government and/or cooperation agencies, which usually comes with certain conditions, although the generation of an independent budget through local taxes has significantly improved over the years of the process; the tensions between different understandings of well-being influenced by migration to capitalist centers, which are especially present in the indigenous zone; the lack of employment prospects that many youths still associate with staying in Nabón, which will further nurture emigration; the threat that mining concessions on the water-storing highlands constitutes for all agricultural production; the effects of the free trade agreement with the European Union, which Rafael Correa's government signed in 2016, on small agriculture and the possibility of new public policies aimed at improving the deal's implementation.

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50 Amelia Erráez moved from Pachakutik to Alianza País around 2013 and ran in the 2014 municipal election against her former vice-mayor Magali Quezada, who won.

It is difficult to evaluate the conditions under which the people of Nabón will have to consolidate their achievements in the next years, since the transition in the Ecuadorian central government from Rafael Correa to Lenin Moreno in May 2017 signified a much greater shift than had been expected. Although Moreno won for the same political party Alianza País, he soon began to demonstrate his divergence from his predecessor, especially regarding the fierce political control Correa always exercised over the media and organized civil society, and his political will to bring to light networks of corruption that had apparently blossomed in Correa's years. Soon afterwards Correa, who had emigrated to Belgium, would insult Moreno on Twitter for being mediocre, disloyal, and a traitor. As this article was nearing completion, the party Alianza País was on the verge of breaking up while many crucial political decisions had yet to be taken by the new government. Some important ones concerning Nabón, for example on mining concessions in protected areas, were postponed to the beginning of 2018 since Moreno had proposed a referendum which would also cover these.

From the perspective of Nabón, nevertheless, these dramatic changes in rhetoric and attitude in Quito take place on a distant stage: "They let us breathe now, they receive us well," is how Mayor Magali Quezada describes the change she is experiencing.[51] At least it can be said that the grounds for political action from the bottom up seem more promising again under a Moreno government. However, the continuation of mining would ultimately imply the failure of the *Buen Vivir* experiment as a whole.

DIVERGENCE FROM THE LEFT

It is interesting to note that, contrary to many traditional left-wing movements or to Hugo Chavez' claim to have established 21st-century socialism in Venezuela, *Buen Vivir* as a mode of resistance such as it is conceived in Nabón does not need to draw its political and popular legitimacy from revolutionary action or rhetoric. It is not just that both mayors stand out by virtue of their modest and quiet ways. The people of Nabón have in fact largely maintained existing institutions, and they have challenged the nation-state only in its claim to exclusive and centralized jurisdiction over justice, education, or redistribution, but not by seeking to remove president Correa or dramatically change the laws. In the region, recent revolutionary claims have been followed by more negative consequences than that of an emancipatory liberation from neoliberalism and multidimensional domination. More prominently, Chavez's socialist revolution (see the chapter by Edgardo Lander in this book) ended up laying the groundwork for the excessive usurpation of central power by Nicolas Maduro. In Ecuador, Correa's grandiloquent project of a "citizen revolution" led to disciplinary statism and an intensification of extractivism.

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51 Interview with Magali Quezada conducted in Nabón on September 20, 2017.

Instead, the people of Nabón took what was for them the simplest and the most obvious course of action: they collectively decided to act by occupying their own space without waiting for the central state to engage with anything. From a *Buen Vivir* point of view, seeking reciprocity or knowledge-sharing beyond the community is valuable, but trying to 'take power' at a national level in the way that traditional leftist strategies have tried to is not included within this horizon of transformation that revolves around community-building and the search for harmony and equilibrium.[52] As Estefania Lalvay, the young indigenous leader from Ayaloma, states, the people of Nabón see value in simply being there, sharing and selling their healthy organic food, dressed in their traditional clothes, and being happy in the spirit of *Buen Vivir*.

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52 This aspect of focusing on the closest level of the community in the struggle against domination contrasts with traditional left-wing strategies, but is comparable to the Ibadites' sovereigntist movement, a school within Islam which strives for autonomy at the community level.

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MENDHA-LEKHA: **FOREST RIGHTS AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT**

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With contributions from Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, Devaji Tofa, and other members of the Mendha *gram sabha*

INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Mendha-Lekha village is located in Dhanora Taluka of the Gadchiroli District in the Indian state of Maharashtra. The village is home to over 400 people, all belonging to the *Gond* tribe (indigenous people) or the *Koya* (human), as the tribe refers to itself. Like most other indigenous peoples or the *adivasis* in India, the people in this region are also heavily dependent on surrounding forests for their sustenance and livelihood. Within a traditional cosmology of the interconnection of all beings, humans, and forests, forests have been synonymous with existence for these communities. Under colonial rule, and, following Independence, under Indian governments who continued to follow colonial policies and practices, the forests were nationalized and access to forests for *adivasis* and other traditional forest-dwelling communities was systemically and consistently restricted and legally annihilated. For over 200 years such communities have been subjected to exploitation by the government – both colonial and non-colonial; oppressed by a centralized and corrupt bureaucracy; and marginalized by economic and industrial interests. In this context, in August 2009, Mendha became the first village in the country to have its legal rights and responsibilities to use, manage, and conserve the 1,800 hectares of forest falling within its customary boundary recognized under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forests Rights) Act, or Forest Rights Act (FRA), of 2006. This was a milestone in the history of forest governance not just in the village, but for the country as a whole.

This legal change was the result of more than two decades of struggle – as part of a larger regional movement called the *Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan* (Save Forests Save Humanity Movement). Starting in the late 1980s, the movement challenged the centralized and top-down model of governance, appropriation of common property resources, and extractivism-based model of development in the region and the cultural, social, and ecological injustices that they perpetuated. This prolonged tribal resistance was successful in forcing the government to withdraw a few plans for the region, but a more significant outcome was that in the region's many villages it transformed into a strong movement towards self-determination and self-governance, which was based on tribal cultural identity and local community control over traditional lands and resources, including in Mendha.

Mendha's historic struggle and subsequent internal processes of transformation is an iconic and remarkable testimony of what a small tribal village, politically weak and voiceless, could do to empower itself to become a formidable force. From a village where, until a few decades ago, the villagers would run into the forest and hide at the sight of an outsider, to a village today where no activities, even by the highest political or administrative functionaries, can be carried out without the villagers' free prior informed consent. A story of facing and addressing political, administrative, economic, and social

challenges through informed decision-making based on the principles of respect, equity, consensus, transparency, and non-violence. The village's strategies to address these challenges took place on two levels: internal and external. Internally, its transformation has involved in-depth internal dialogue and reflection, and externally it has involved dialogue where possible, collaboration where feasible, and non-violent resistance where needed. Through its resistance the village has consistently questioned, challenged, and eventually catalyzed a change in laws and policies, or dominant social, political, and economic norms. Within Gadchiroli, Mendha is now part of a collective of over thirty *gram sabhas* in the region who work as a political and economic pressure group.

Mendha's struggle has had an impact on the lives of thousands of similar forest-dependent villages and communities across India. For many such villages, government, and non-government agencies, Mendha today has become an informal center of learning. Hundreds of people from across the country visit and learn from Mendha's experiences and experiments. The main actors in Mendha, however, believe that no initiative can ever be replicated as each situation, context, and people is different. Initiatives like Mendha's provide other struggles with important lessons in order for them to develop their own unique initiative in response to their own local situation and socio-cultural and political realities.

This case study is an attempt to describe and analyze the context, the struggle, and alternative approaches which Mendha's struggle and experiments used and led to. The central question that this case study explores is how Mendha moved away from social, economic, and political exploitation and alienation to empower itself socially, politically, and economically. It argues that this transformation was possible because of several interrelated processes, the influence of larger regional movements, and a confluence of many actors and political ideologies. At the root of this was the village's own intense aspiration and efforts devoted towards finding a resolution to the oppressive situation that they were faced with. Through this process, Mendha transformed its political community both from within and towards the outside. By doing so it acquired ecological, social, and livelihood security, economic independence, and political efficacy.

For the sake of easy reading and clarity, this case study has been divided into an initial descriptive part (in a chronological order) and subsequent analytical part. This has been done to the extent that it is possible to separate the two without affecting the flow. First, the section provides the background and context to Mendha's resistance and transformation process, and describes the historical circumstances that led to the resistance and transformation. This is followed by a description and analysis of the process of resistance and transformation; the role played by external actors; the emergence of study circles to facilitate informed decision-making; the endeavor to explore and address internal

weaknesses, including gender and age-based discrimination, as well as external power structures, including by taking de facto charge of the village administration and forest-based livelihoods and governance; and political ideology and institutions in Mendha. The subsequent section describes and analyzes what the village has been able to achieve through these institutions, including social, political, economic, and ecological gains. The fourth section contextualizes Mendha's resistance and transformation in the larger regional political and administrative environment, its relationship with the state, state agencies, and the extreme and armed political left in the region, and some criticism that Mendha faces. **The conclusion** draws similarities between the situation when the Gadchiroli Movement began in the 1980s and where Gadchiroli district stands today, with forest rights recognized but with those same forests being leased out for mining. The case study comes to an end with an open question about what the future will bring.

BACKGROUND
COLONIAL FOREST POLICIES AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Mendha's resistance and that of hundreds of communities across India is part of a larger resource politics emerging from the competing aspirations of state, corporations, and local communities. Forests constitute over 76 percent of the total geographical area of Gadchiroli district. Most of these are dense and rich in timber, bamboo, and other forest produce important for local people as well as for the state for their commercial value. As much as 85 percent of the state's bamboo, for example, comes from Gadchiroli district. Until recently, the forests of Gadchiroli had been extensively exploited by the state forest department for commercial purposes. Most of these commercial forest extractions were carried out through leases to different industries. For example, since 1968, the Maharashtra government had leased most of its bamboo forests to Ballarpur Industries Limited (BILT). The paper mill, which has over the years become amongst the biggest economic powers in this region, was given leases which also included Mendha's forests. The roots of this resource politics lie in colonial rule and its appropriation of common property resources for the commercial interest of the state.

Historically, across India forests were taken over by the colonial British government in 1865 through the enactment of the Indian Forest Act and the creation of an elaborate forest bureaucracy to manage the forests. Colonial interests in these forests were extractive and commercial; local customary governance and its use of forests was considered an encumbrance and hindrance to the maximization of benefits for the colonial state. These customary uses therefore were either extinguished completely or were granted not as rights but as privileges, dependent on the payment of specified fees (Guha, 1994).

The forests of Gadchiroli district, like in other parts of the country, were taken over by the British, but unlike in other parts these forests continued to be managed by local

feudal land lords (*zamindars*) until 1950. In 1950, this region was still part of what the British called the Central Provinces and Berar, also referred to as C.P. and Berar (parts of the present-day states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Chhattisgarh). Much like the tribal populations across India, in Gadchiroli district tribal communities were also, and continue to be, heavily dependent on the forests for their subsistence and cultural survival. Considering that *zamindars* in this region were tribal themselves, there were few restrictions on subsistence resource extraction, barring species prohibited by the government because of their commercial value for the state. The *zamindars* would allow customary use and access rights to the local people according to their whims and fancies. In exchange for access to the forests, the local villagers were required to work for the *zamindar* without payment (*begari*).

After the *Zamindari*, or feudal system, was abolished in Independent India, the forests in Gadchiroli came to be vested with the State of India. and suitable areas were handed over to the Forest Department (FD) in 1951. Soon these forests were declared Protected Forests (PF) under the Colonial Indian Forest Act of 1927 (IFA). PF meant that the forests would be controlled and managed by a centralized forest bureaucracy although local people could continue to access resources for subsistence. At the same time, the government set up a committee to enquire into the customary rights of the local people, which was carried out between 1951 and 56. Based on this, in 1956 a detailed *nistar patrak* (record of rights) for each village was prepared in C.P. and Berar. These *nistar patraks* were unique and significant as such detailed records of the collective rights of each village over their common property resources were rarely elsewhere in the country. These *nistar patraks*, however, were not handed over to the respective villages but were kept at the nearest government land revenue office. After Maharashtra became an independent state in 1960, these rights were included in the state's Land Revenue Code and hence came to be legally accepted by the state (Pathak & Gour-Broome, 2001).

In 1959, the government of India declared its intention to designate a large part of the forests in C.P and Berar, including those in Gadchiroli, as Reserved Forests (RFs). RFs mandate a highly restricted use of resources by the local people. The declaration of RFs as per the Indian Forest Act requires a process that entails the settlement of rights; few, if any, rights are allowed to continue, and if so, then on the basis of the payment of specified taxes. The *nistar patraks* lost in the government offices were gradually forgotten by the state and were forced out of people's memory. Without following the specified legal processes, settlement, and/or the acceptance of rights as per the *nistar patraks*, these forests gradually began to be treated by the Forest Department as de facto RFs and people's rights were systemically abridged, even though the legal declaration of RFs was made only in 1992.

Among the hundreds of villages impacted by these exclusionary, top-down policies implemented by the government was Mendha-Lekha village. A large part of their 1,800 hectares of traditional forest was among the proposed RFs. Consequently, the Forest Department began to issue passes for accessing the forest, but now, in contrast to previously, these passes were issued upon payment of taxes only. Considering that access to the forest was essential for practically all needs of a family and the specified official taxes were beyond the capacity of the people, a system of informal payments or bribes in kind to the local forest officers became a common practice. A conventional norm was to take a portion of the very first harvest straight from the farmer's fields to the forest office, locally referred to as *khaldda* (to be shared by all concerned officials). This was in addition to the chicken, liquor, and local forest produce that they would have to give as payment throughout the year. Although the times during the *zamindar* were by no means easy for the people, people in Mendha describe the period between the state take-over in the 1950s and the early 1980s, when the movement towards self-rule became stronger, as one of great hardship and humiliation. People were at the mercy of the local forest officials, despite paying heavy bribes.

RADICAL SHIFT IN FOREST POLICY AND LAW

In 2006, after a long-standing grassroots struggle by tribal communities across India against alienating, oppressive, top-down forest and conservation policies, the government of India enacted a landmark law – The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006, also called the Forest Rights Act of India for short (hereafter referred to as the FRA). The FRA is revolutionary in its acknowledgement of the historic injustice that has been committed against forest dwelling communities in colonial and post-colonial times and its declaration that the rights of these communities to their traditional forests are "already vested"; it is only a matter of completing the process of recording. The processes of the recognition and verification of forest rights in the FRA is currently the only legal process in the country for determining local forest rights. The FRA recognizes fourteen pre-existing rights to all categories of forestland, such as Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) over land being cultivated by forest-dwelling communities, but over which they do not have any tenure rights, and Community Rights (CRs) over the use of and access to forest land and resources which can be claimed under the law. In addition, the FRA also enables the *gram sabha*s (village assemblies) to claim their rights to use, manage, and conserve their traditional forests (here on Community Forest Resources or CFRs), and protect them from internal and external threats. The law also seeks to democratize forest governance by ensuring that the informed consent of the *gram sabha* is sought before their CRs or CFR forests are diverted for non-forestry purposes. If seen in conjunction, together all these provisions have the potential to transform and radically democratize forest governance and

conservation regimes in India, impacting the lives of over 200 million forest-dependent people across the country (CFR-LA, 2016). Already in the country, a few *gram sabhas* (some successfully and others not so successfully) have legally challenged the diversion of their traditional forests for mining and other extractive uses, using the provisions of this Act. It is precisely for this reason that the implementation of the Act has remained an uphill task, with only 3 percent of its potential being realized a decade after its enactment in 2006. One of the reasons for the poor implementation of the Act nationwide has been a lack of political and administrative will to support its radically transformative provisions. The only regions where the Act has been better implemented are those where forest-dwelling communities have mobilized local people's movements, or civil society actors are active and administrative officials are supportive (CFR-LA, 2016).

A report on the ten years of implementation of the FRA in Maharashtra, published in March 2017 (Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017), indicates that Maharashtra is a leading state in the implementation of the FRA, having recognized 20 percent of the minimum potential of CFR rights. Significantly, over 60 percent of these rights have been recognized in Gadchiroli district alone, one of thirty-six districts in the state. This translates to mean that by March 2017, governance and management rights had been transferred to 1,355 villages over an area of 433,995 hectares of forests in the district. A combination of factors have contributed to the progress made by the FRA in Gadchiroli, including a strong mass movement, a district-level study circle whose role is to understand and facilitate the process of filing claims, the effective and timely support of civil society actors, and an occasionally supportive district administration, among others. The district-level study circle ensured that the much forgotten existing record of rights in the form of *nistar patraks* were unearthed and provided to the villagers in order to make their claims stronger. They also worked as a pressure group to ensure that all relevant government records that could be used in this process were provided by the government to each and every village in the district. In this context, Mendha emerged as an example and played an important role in the district-level processes related to the FRA. The village started with study circle discussions in their own village, followed by an effective implementation of the law, to eventually become the first village in the country to have their CFR rights recognized. This paved the way for hundreds of others in the district and in the country. Villages which, after years of alienation, were not convinced that rights could actually be recognized, saw Mendha as an inspiration and source of encouragement. The various struggles of Mendha's villagers throughout the process of filing their claims and asserting their rights once they gained recognition have brought about significant policy interpretations and legal changes in the forest laws in the state and the country (see section on the implementation of the FRA below). Mendha continues to be an inspiration and learning ground for hundreds of villages across the country going through similar struggles to assert their rights under the FRA.

RESISTANCE AND TRANSFORMATION AT THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

In the mid-1980s, tribal communities already reeling under oppressive and alienating forest policies and atrocities were in for another shock when the government announced a number of "development" activities for the region. In addition to the continuation of the commercial exploitation of forests by the Forest Department, the plan included an extensive network of 17-18 hydro-electric dams, mainly over the River Indravati, which flows through the southern region of the district, but also on other rivers. The plan, if accomplished, would have resulted in the relocation of large populations from Southern Gadchiroli and Bastar District in Madhya Pradesh – both largely inhabited by forest-dwelling *adivasi* communities. A massive people's gathering was organized in Gadchiroli district headquarters in 1984, with hundreds of tribal villages participating in the rally. This was followed by a series of village-level meetings, as well as meetings at the *Ilaka* (erstwhile feudal administrative division for a cluster of villages) level.

The Gadchiroli Movement raised many questions about the model of development that was being proposed and came to be called *Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan* (Save Forest Save Humanity Movement). Numerous slogans raised by the people during these meetings represented their political and developmental ideology. These included "*Jungle jeene ka adhaar*" (Forests are the basis of life), *"Jungle katenge ham katenge, jungle bachenge ham bachenge"* (If forests are cut our lifeline will be cut, if forests are saved we are saved), "*Pani chahiye Bandh nahin, kuaan chahiye mruthyu nahi*" (we want water not dams, we want wells not death – essentially saying building dams will kill people and to sustain life smaller water-harvesting structures and wells are needed). The most significant feature of these meetings was that the people participating in them were not only those directly impacted by the dams and leases but thousands of others who came in solidarity to resist this model of development, which was alienating and oppressive. The Movement was supported at various points by a number of politically and socially influential individuals. Significant among them were Lalsham Shah Maharaj – an ex-Zamindar from the area, Dr. B.D. Sharma – a renowned civil servant, an activist for tribal rights and then Commissioner of the National Commission on Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, and Baba Amte and Sundar Lal Bahuguna – both renowned social workers, Gandhian, and activists. These important figures came from ideological perspectives ranging from socialist, to Gandhian, and the political left. All these political ideologies played an important role in influencing the Gadchiroli Movement, which subsequently transformed into a process towards self-determination and self-governance based on tribal cultural identity and local community control over traditional lands and resources.

The Gadchiroli Movement revealed the power of the people to the government and to all political parties and in the end the dam projects were shelved. Control over the forests, however, remained with the Forest Department, and forest leases continued to be given for commercial extraction.

TOWARDS SELF-RULE AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN MENDHA

A group of villagers from Mendha, including Devaji Tofa, attended all the rallies and meetings organized as part of *Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan*. In addition to expressing solidarity, this was one of the many attempts for them to find a solution to their own decreasing access to their traditional forests and increasing oppression by the Forest Department. Village elders had had many discussions within the village and also approached local and district level political and social leaders in the hope of some help and relief. Despite many assurances from political leaders over the years their situation had only worsened. During a meeting organized by the neighboring villages of Heti and Devsur, Devaji Tofa met Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, one of the main mobilizers of the Gadchiroli Movement. Mohan and his wife Savita were to play a quintessential role in bringing the Movement's ideas to Mendha and in the subsequent internal processes and struggle towards self-rule.

Mohan and Savita were deeply inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Hind-Swaraj (self-rule) and Vinoba Bhave's ideology of Sarvayatan (rule by all). They had been associated with the student social movement and strongly believed in the idea that representative democracy in its current form rendered people powerless and vulnerable to oppression. People have the real political power, which they hand over to their representatives in electoral and representative democracy, leading to a concentration of political power in the hands of a few. They believed such a concentration of power to be a kind of structural violence. For true transformation, decision-making power had to be with the local community, and not just a few within the community but all members. Being part of the *Jugle bachao manav bachao andolan*, their conviction had grown and it had become clear to them that there were two crucial issues to be taken into consideration for any kind of development in this region.

These were:

> Forests were the basis of life for people and hence people's control over forests and forest-related decision-making was essential.

> People and forests faced injustice because of structural violence perpetuated by the concentration of power. They believed that such injustice would continue until decision-making processes included all (direct democracy) instead of a few (representative democracy) at all levels of governance.

In the current system of governance, decision-making power and control over resources were not in the hands of the people. The decision-makers in Delhi (the national capital) and Mumbai (the state capital) did not bear local interests in mind. The People's Movement was a clear indication of local discontent over injustices arising out of this situation. Mohan and Savita believed that the disempowerment of the people was a combined result of both external structural conditions and internal socio-political and cultural weaknesses. In such a context, while resistance against external structural injustices was important, processes of internal explorations were equally important for a meaningful, all-pervasive and long-term transformation.

Having being part of various social justice movements , Mohan and Savita were in search of a collaborating village in order to collectively explore more deeply and actualize on the ground the process by which a socio-political transformation could happen. With the aim of undertaking participatory action research towards this they travelled to and discussed their idea with sixty-five villages in Gadchiroli. Eventually, twenty-two of the sixty-five villages agreed to participate in such a study; Mendha was one of them. Devaji Tofa was himself very interested in understanding the process of transformation and accompanied Mohan and Savita to all the villages in the district. One of the important criteria that this team set out for themselves was to engage with a village which 1) was interested in action research of this kind and 2) already had certain elements conducive to this process of transformation.

One important reason for the inclusion of Mendha in the study was its traditional justice system that distinguished it from other villages in the region. Traditional justice among the Gond tribe is consensus-based, i.e. no decision on any conflict is ever taken until all women and men in the community agree with the decision, including the parties directly involved in the conflict. In Mendha, this practice was still followed and the conflict-resolution process involved intense and long discussions till a consensus was reached. Other decisions regarding village governance, however, were not consensus-based, but were taken by traditionally chosen village leaders, invariably men. On Savita and Mohan's request, Mendha invited them to stay in the village and take part in the study[1]. Mohan and Savita began by joining the informal evening gatherings at the village square. Soon they introduced the idea that discussions in such gatherings would be called "study circle discussions" and used as the main methodology for the collaborative action research project. Anyone in the village interested in the subject of the discussion would join them. This was a critical intervention in Mendha's long journey towards self-rule and over the years it has emerged *one of Mendha's strongest points – discussing issues exhaustively, respectfully, and honestly in an open and non-judg-*

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1   Savita and Mohan lived in Mendha for a period of a year-and-a-half for the action research. Since then they have stayed involved with the village as long-term collaborator friends.

mental environment, and taking into account the most insignificant sounding opposition, till every member of the village agrees or consents.

Considering that the forest was an immediate and significant issue for the village and this is what Savita and Mohan were also interested in exploring, the first action research method that Mendha village undertook with Mohan and Savita was on understanding the "forest/people relationship" in all its dimensions. This became the main issue of discussion in the village square discussions or the study circles. People in the village joined these discussions in large numbers and kept bringing up the issue of their reduced access to the forests and oppression by the Forest Department. The study circle began discussing why they were not able to address something as crucial as access to the forests. Why did they not have access? What had happened to their *nistar rights*? Why was the Forest Department taking all the decisions regarding the forests? Who was the Forest Department? Numerous similar questions arose and were discussed in depth.

EMPOWERMENT BEGINS BY UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING INTERNAL WEAKNESSES

Over a period of time the study circle concluded that the above questions were linked to the villagers not being empowered enough. Discussions on what makes people disempowered identified four main reasons for disempowerment: external systemic and structural injustices, and internal weaknesses. Villagers began discussing what the major internal weaknesses were that rendered them disempowered.

They identified many but concluded that mainly four of those reduced their political power:

> The traditional decision-making system involved only male elders, presided by the village priest; youth and women were excluded.

> The non-involvement of women in traditional decision-making meant eliminating 50 percent of the village's perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom from those decisions.

> Alcoholism among men was leading to domestic violence against women, draining resources, and rendering people incapable of making effective decisions.

> Not knowing and not understanding administrative and legal processes was a disadvantage and led to villagers not being able to take informed decisions.

The members of the study circle concluded that ensuring access to the forests would mean gaining decision-making rights and powers. These powers could only be gained through a long and difficult struggle against very strong structural and legal regimes. Such a struggle would mean self-empowerment and no process of self-empowerment

could be achieved if women were not an integral part of the struggle (including in deci-sion-making), if people were inebriated, and uninformed.

ALCOHOLISM A PRIMARY ISSUE FOR WOMEN

When women were encouraged to be part of village decision-making processes, the first issue that they raised was "alcoholism." Local alcohol brewed from *Mahua* (*Madhuca indica*) is part of traditional Gond culture and its rituals. Alcohol consump-tion in the village, according to women, was not restricted to ceremonial purposes and had reached a level that was leading to the exclusion of women, domestic violence, and poverty. They also pointed out what had already been discussed in study circles on numerous occasions: that alcoholism was rendering people incapable of making effective and informed decisions. Women insisted on a ban on the production, sale, and consumption of alcohol in the village. This brought out many internal conflicts in the village and also revealed the impact of external power hierarchies.

Many men, particularly those who consumed alcohol or were financially benefiting from its trade, began to strongly resist women's participation in decision-making (mild resist-ance to this continues to date); those already in positions of power began to see women as a threat to their power. Every discussion in the study circles about a ban on alcohol led to intense conflicts. A decision was taken in the study circle to discuss the "impact of alcohol on their society and well-being" instead of a discussion on "banning alcohol consumption." Special efforts were made to ensure that those consuming alcohol or financially benefiting from its production and sale were present in these discussions. Various questions began to be discussed, including what is the impact of alcoholism on the village? Who benefits from it? What impact does it have on children, women, and families? What impact does it have on those who drink, produce, and sell it? What does banning alcohol mean? What impact would it have?

People insisted that alcohol was an integral part of traditional Gond culture and ceremo-nies and hence should not be banned. The study circle then decided to discuss what was the meaning behind the use of alcohol in ceremonies. This meant delving deeper into the origins of such traditions and the reasons for them. Over a year of discussions concluded that the use of alcohol in the current context was no longer aligned with what it traditionally was. People had forgotten the meaning, origins, and significance of alcohol in the ceremonies. After a deep exploration of what the use of alcohol in tradi-tional ceremonies really meant the study circle's discussions concluded that the current use of alcohol was a form of abuse and traditions were merely being used to justify such abuse. The regulation of the production and use of alcohol was therefore not found to be in violation of traditional practices.

Following these discussions the *gram sabha* eventually took the following decisions regarding alcohol production and use in the village:

> Alcohol will not be brewed by the villagers, except for ceremonial and ritualistic purposes and only with permission of the *gram sabha*;

> Alcohol will not be sold in the village;

> Alcohol will not be consumed within the village, except by elders during the ceremonies (young people were forbidden from consuming alcohol);

> Those drinking outside and coming to the village shall not engage in violence or social disruption of any kind.

Any violation of these rules would result in social sanctions and cultural penalties. One of the positive outcomes of this was women's mobilization and organization. They came together to start a support group for those who may be facing domestic violence or oppression because of alcoholism or other reasons. This later translated into the formation of an empowered and socially active women's group in the village and the active participation of women in all decision-making processes and village struggles.

THE DISTRICT-LEVEL ANTI-ALCOHOL MOVEMENT IN GADCHIROLI

At the same time that Mendha was struggling with the issue of alcohol, discussions and movements against alcohol started gaining momentum across the district of Gadchiroli and slowly spread to other neighboring states such as Andhra Pradesh. The idea of an alcohol-free district was not a moralistic or ethical issue but a political issue related to local empowerment and development. A district-level study group, which included thinkers and activists from the district, was formed to improve understanding of this issue. This group calculated and compared the amount of money coming to the district for development and the amount that was being spent on alcohol: the latter was found to be greater than the former. The district-level movement and Mendha's decisions on alcohol inspired over 150 *gram sabha*s in the district to formulate their own internal regulations related to alcohol. Eventually, the district administration was forced to admit the social impact of alcohol and officially banned alcohol in the district, except if brewed for ceremonial purposes and for self-consumption. A subsequent study carried out by the district-level study circle in 1993-94 showed that the ban had led to 65 percent of people giving up alcohol. They also found that such people and their families enjoyed better socio-economic circumstances than before; their children had better education, and domestic violence against women and children in such families had substantially reduced. While the anti-alcohol movement weakened in the rest of the district over a period of time, the alcohol ban continues to be complied with in Mendha.

ESTABLISHING A POLITICAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL IDEOLOGY

Within this larger context, one of the initial journeys for the village was to establish its implicit political ideology. This political and developmental ideology emerged through an organic dialectic between the traditional Gond way of being and Mahatma Gandhi's idea of *Hind Swaraj* as it informed the process through Mohan. The idea of *Hind Swaraj* itself was never directly discussed in the study circles but influenced the discussions through Mohan.

As he explains: Vinoba Bhave, a well-known Gandhian, had spoken about self-rule to be based on consensual decision-making. Vinoba said that there is a polity that calls itself "Democracy" and pretends to be *sarvayatan* (rule by all). However, this system uses violence to achieve democracy. No system based on violence can call itself *sarvayatan*, even if it pretends to work on the basis of one person one vote. On the contrary, *sarvayatan* should be based on wisdom, competency, freedom from attachment and hatred, and devoted to the welfare of all.

This would include the basic principles of:

> Comprehensive and equal development of all
> Maximum possible distribution of political power
> Minimum possible governance
> Simplest system of administration
> Lowest possible expenditure
> Universal, uninterrupted, and free distribution of knowledge.

With the infusion of these basic principles the study circles began to explore the concepts of development and governance. The discussions began to explore questions such as what is Government? What is Development? Is development the construction of roads, schools, and hospitals? Who should carry out development and for whom? Villagers knew that in the current scheme of things all decisions were taken by the government, including about village development and the use of and control over resources. Everyone expected the government to do the right thing, but no one in the village knew who or what the government was. The collective experience of people showed that the government did little for the well-being of the people. Their experiences with government officials had largely been shaped by oppression, extortion, and bribes. Villagers began to question why they should wait for the government to "develop" them? Why could they themselves not define what their needs were and address them?

This gave rise to two main slogans in the village: "Dilli, Mumbai mawa sarkar, Mawa nate mate sarkar" (our representatives constitute the government in Delhi and Mumbai and WE are the government in our village) and "*Jungle nasht karne vikas nahi, sanskriti*

nasht karne sudhar nahi" (no development by destroying forests, and no reform by destroying cultures). Both these slogans represented Mendha's political and development ideology in a nutshell. These slogans laid a strong ideological foundation for village self-rule and Mendha's struggle to take charge of its forests.

Gram sabha, Mendha

VILLAGE INSTITUTIONS AS PART OF THE PROCESS OF SELF-EMPOWERMENT

Although not written down or necessarily articulated as such, the various principles that emerged during the study circle discussions and became basic principles deeply entrenched in Mendha's decision-making institutions and processes included a collaborative knowledge-creation space using new and old knowledge systems (including villagers and outsiders); a decision-making space where no outsiders can interfere; equal opportunity for all in decision-making within the village through consensual decisions; a space for non-violent action, which can be undertaken by anyone from within and outside, under the supervision of the *gram sabha*.

ABHYAS GAT OR STUDY CIRCLES

Study circles are important village institutions in the production, assimilation, and transmission of knowledge. According to Mohan, "any social group is a conglomeration of some thinkers, some talkers, some doers, some whose nature is to work for the benefit of the others, while others are self-focused and subversive in nature. The need is to identify those who like to talk and start discussing with them, if issues are of consequence

or interest others will join in." This is how the discussion groups/study circles/*Abhays gat* started in Mendha. When people would sit and discuss, Mohan and Savita would join them and start introducing a range of issues which were not traditionally discussed, including news of the outside world and new laws and policies. Villagers found these discussions enriching as these provided them with insights into the outside world. As described earlier, one of the most significant study circles was on Forests and People which lasted from 1987 to 1989. The results of the discussions emerging from this became the foundation for the struggle for self-rule in the village. Gradually, the villagers started using the opportunity when visitors came to the village to talk to them in the evenings, find out about their work, and inform them about the village initiative. They also started inviting experts from outside if needed. In this way, a large number of people became associated with Mendha over a period of time who contributed directly and indirectly towards their effort. Study-group discussions helped the villagers develop their own conversation skills and confidence, awareness of the world outside, and, most importantly, provided them with important contributions towards informed decisions to be taken at the *gram sabha* meetings or in negotiations with powerful outside government and non-government actors.

GRAM SABHA (THE VILLAGE ASSEMBLY)

The gram sabha is the main decision-making body in the village and is represented by at least two people (one male and one female) from each family in the village. Decisions are taken unanimously (not on the basis of a majority) and implemented through oral yet strong social norms. The gram sabha has many specified rules, some of which are written down and kept in the gram sabha office, but not all. Villagers believe "rules when written down tend to become rigid, and allow for little flexibility." The gram sabha meets every Purnima (full moon) at noon. But villagers meet regularly on various issues and for pressing or urgent matters all members are informed and a meeting is immediately convened. Attending gram sabha meetings is compulsory for each family as the village considers regular dialogue-based informed decision-making to be their biggest strength. On average, about 75 percent of members attend the gram sabha meetings. The appointed day of the gram sabha is also a declared polo2 (community holiday), to make it possible for the maximum number of people to participate. There are no gram sabha office bearers; Devaji was appointed convener in recent times to ensure a smooth running. Gram sabha meetings begin with appointing a president for the day; the president convenes the meeting. Minutes of the meetings are meticulously maintained.

The *gram sabha* has an office where all the village records, records of the meetings, and accounts are kept and other village organization activities are carried out. One person

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2   Polo is a traditional system of declaring a break from individual activities on
     one day in a week to facilitate community meetings and activities.

from the village has been appointed as a regular office administrator to manage the office and is paid a salary by the *gram sabha*.

GRAM SABHA RULES

> Cutting trees for fruits, flowers, leaves, or honey and cutting primary branches of trees is strictly prohibited.

> Liquor brewing and consumption is strictly prohibited and violations are fined. Distilling for traditional ceremonies is permitted upon prior permission of the gram sabha.

> Central or state government agencies, contractors, NGOs cannot carry out any activities in the village without the free prior informed consent of the gram sabha.

> All villagers are to endeavor to contribute towards village administration voluntarily.

> The difficulty of an individual is the difficulty of the community and the difficulty of the community is the difficulty of the individual.

> All internal village conflicts will be resolved in the gram sabha by consensus. Gram sabha members should avoid involving police or the court without prior discussions on the issue in the gram sabha.

> Beneficiaries for all government schemes should be selected by the gram sabha by consensus.

> People are free to bribe officials in cash and kind if they so wish, but they must take a receipt in writing from the person or else deposit the same amount in the gram sabha account.

> When visitors (including government officials) visit the village without prior notice, people must continue with their important work and must not feel compelled to attend to the visitors.

> Shramdan (voluntary labor contribution) for any village activity should not be undertaken if it falls only on a few people and families; all must contribute.

> All living beings (including humans) have equal rights to natural resources. We will strive to use natural resources without impacting upon other species.

> Irrespective of who owns the land, water above and below belongs to all, and all villagers have an equal right over it.

> 10 percent of all earnings by members of the gram sabha will be deposited in the village bank account for collective use.

> 2.5 percent of the harvest has to be deposited in the village grain bank.

Decisions in the *gram sabha* are consensus-based, and if no consensus is reached the decision is deferred. Any member of the village can re-open a decision for further discussion at any time in the future. The consensus system seems to works well in Mendha because of its homogenous population and an absence of caste inequities. Inclusive and transparent decision-making ensures the villagers' adherence to all *gram sabha* decisions. Decisions taken by the *gram sabha* prevail over any other official or unofficial orders. All outsiders (government officials, researchers, NGOs) who intend to carry out any activity in the village or the adjoining forests have to present their plan in the *gram sabha* and seek the permission of the village.

IMPLEMENTING SUB-COMMITTEES

The village has various sub-committees constituted to implement the decisions of the *gram sabha*, such as the Van Suraksha Samittee (VSS) or Forest Protection Committee, which implement all decisions related to forest management. In recent times, all the members of the village have been organized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), each group including five men and five women. These SHGs work as smaller support groups for its members and also collectively undertake various responsibilities for the commons in the village. The village has also constituted smaller groups, some looking at the drafting of community diversity registers, another working on the formulation of a forest manage-ment plan, yet another looking into water-related issues; another group manages the village tractor, and yet another group is working on the formulation of job plans under the National Employment Guarantee Scheme. The traditional system of justice also continues. For all activities carried out under the *gram sabha*, whether related to labor, research, management, or governance, villagers are paid by the *gram sabha* at a fixed daily wage rate (except in some cases when the village decides to carry out an activity through voluntary contributions or *shramdaan*). This ensures that all village governance activities run smoothly while the livelihoods of the people are secured. *Shramdaan* depends on the need in the moment and whether or not resources are available for them. If not, then villagers contribute voluntary labor. There are also common social activities which are collectively done, such as village cleaning, village functions, extin-guishing forest fires, forest patrolling, livestock grazing, among others.
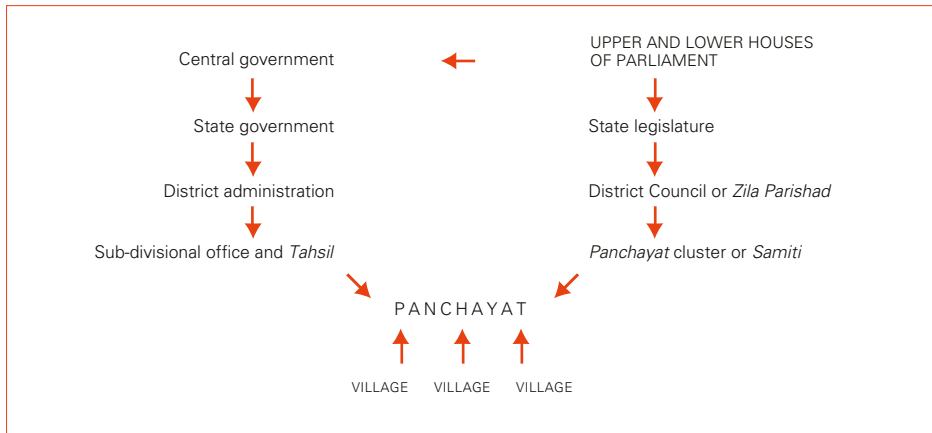
SELFEMPOWERMENT AND INSTITUTIONS

Before understanding how Mendha addressed some of the systemic and structural injustices it has suffered, it is important to understand the state's governance and administrative context that Mendha is a part of.

India has a three-tier federal system of governance: the Central government, State government and the *Panchayat*i Raj System (adopted by different states in 1960s). Under the *Panchayat*i Raj System the smallest unit of decision-making is a *Panchayat*.

A *Panchayat* can be at the level of one village or a cluster of villages, depending on the population of the villages. This means that one or two representatives from each village are elected to the *Panchayat* (if the *Panchayat* has many small villages then representatives from some villages may not be part of the *Panchayat*). Each *Panchayat* has tenure for five years and the head of the *Panchayat* is called the *Sarpanch*. The government appoints a government functionary as a secretary to the *Panchayat*. Eight times a year, all the adult members of the villages which are part of the *Panchayat* are expected to meet. This is officially called the general body of the *Panchayat* or the *gram sabha*.

ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM   POLITICAL SYSTEM

Central government   ←   UPPER AND LOWER HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

State government   State legislature

District administration   District Council or *Zila Parishad*

Sub-divisional office and *Tahsil*   *Panchayat* cluster or *Samiti*

PANCHAYAT

VILLAGE   VILLAGE   VILLAGE

This system of governance has often been criticized for being an extension of representative governance and not direct democracy, and consequently for not being truly empowering for the village communities. The *Panchayat gram sabha* meetings are rarely attended by the villagers as their villages are far and issues concerning them are rarely discussed in depth. *Panchayats* therefore have become another corrupt extension of the government establishment, with little financial or administrative power. One of the unfortunate realities across India is the heavy politicization of the *Panchayats*. It is common practice for national and regional political parties to establish roots at the village level and candidates standing for *Panchayat* elections often have party affiliations. This has created political divisions and factions within the villages and *Panchayats*, often leading to murky politics of power rather than elections for this basic unit being based on issues of local significance.

Officially, Mendha falls under the Lekha *Panchayat*, along with two other neighboring villages. The three villages falling under this *Panchayat* together elect five members

who constitute the executive council for these villages. This is officially the first level of decision-making for these three villages. However, in the case of Mendha, the first level of decision-making happens de facto at their own village *gram sabha* (see section above). Mendha's *gram sabha* unanimously selects (instead of electing) members to represent them in the *Panchayat*. This method of selecting members for the *Panchayat* is a practice followed in most Gond villages in this region, as an extension of the traditional practice of choosing village elders to make decisions for the village. Among the reasons why Mendha chose to continue with this traditional system of nominating rather than electing was the desire to avoid the village being divided along party lines.

In Mendha, the compliance of the villagers with decisions made by their own *gram sabha* is more important than the ones made by the official *Panchayat*. Initially, there was resistance in the *Panchayat* to this but there has never been any major conflict between these two institutions. Over a period of time the *Panchayat* has accepted the importance of Mendha's *gram sabha* for its people. The *gram sabha* has also established itself as an informal but empowered institution both within and outside of the village. The *gram sabha* has often coordinated with the *Panchayat* to ensure that Mendha receives the benefits that come from state agencies through *panchat*, but also to ensure that the distribution of these benefits within the village is handled by the *gram sabha* so that it is transparent and equitable.

TAKING CHARGE OF VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION AND LEGAL RECORDS

Study circles had already identified the lack of knowledge about legal and administrative processes as one of the reasons for disempowerment. Subsequent discussions helped them realize that not being in possession and control of official papers, records, maps, and information about their village, lands, and forests added to their being disempowered. All this information was recorded and kept by government agencies. The absence of any documents or information related to their *nistar* rights prevented them from asserting these rights.

As a first step towards achieving self-rule, the *gram sabha* established an office of its own and initiated the process of acquiring factual, legal, and political information about their village, including various village, revenue, and *nistar* maps. The villagers faced strong initial resistance from the local administration but eventually they succeeded. Once all the legal and government records of rights and maps were with them, they insisted that the revenue and forest officials come and help them ascertain their legal boundaries on the ground as per the maps. This was an extremely important victory for the villagers to gain the confidence that political power that rightfully belongs to them can be taken back through informed, transparent, and non-violent collective action. Taking charge of their *nistar* records was also significant from the point of view

of hundreds of other villages of erstwhile C.P. and Berar province facing resource alienation. These villages could now also ask for their own *nistar patraks.* Subsequently, some of these records also became crucial evidence for claims filed under the Forest Rights Act when it was implemented.

The second step towards self-rule was a declaration that no outside agency, whether Central government, State government, contractors, or NGOs, would carry out any activity in the village without the free prior informed consent of the village. Mendha's declaration of self-rule Dilli, Mumbai mawa sarkar, Mawa nate mate sarkar was announced to all.

TAKING CHARGE OF THE FORESTS AND ASSERTING CULTURAL IDENTITY BY RECONSTRUCTING A GHOTUL

With its declaration of self-rule, Mendha also announced that having taken charge of their *nistar* forests, the villagers would no longer pay any bribes to any government offices and would no longer allow their forests to be commercially exploited. Mendha's declaration of self-rule faced strong opposition from all conventional centers of power – the strongest coming from the Forest Department. Mendha's declaration came at a time when the department was in one of its harvest cycles and had employed labor from outside to carry out forestry operations in Mendha's forests. The village decided to stop the harvest. The entire village calmly marched to the forest and surrounded the area being felled. They asked the workers to stop cutting the trees. The village strategy was to not use any violence, whatever the situation. The villagers kept asking the department to go back and stop all forestry operations. The police was called in and many threats were made over the next few days; the villagers, however, persisted. When the police came to the village, the villagers invited them to a discussion to explain what they were doing and why. Eventually the Forest Department had to stop the work but the conflict with the department continued and intensified.

The villagers' next step towards asserting their *nistar* rights over the forests was to harvest teak (*Tectona grandis*) wood to reconstruct a traditional structure called a *ghotul* (Tofa & Mohan, 2006). Through the study circle discussions, the villagers had rediscovered the significance of *ghotuls* for Gond culture. In conventional Indian society, tribal culture has been considered uncivilized and backward, and in need of reform. Various dominant religions have had programs for their active conversion. Consequently, many tribal communities have adopted, either forcefully or through systemic assimilation, dominant cultures and religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity. In the process, many important cultural linkages have been lost. One such important aspect of Gond culture was the *ghotul*. The *ghotul* was (and in some small pockets still is) a unique

system of learning and transference of knowledge, culture, and worldviews. A *ghotul* is a hut where young unmarried girls and boys would assemble, dance, sing, discuss, learn, and sleep. The renowned anthropologist Verrier Elwin explains that "the Gonds believe that Lingo, the supreme deity and the heroic ancestor of the Gond tribe, was the founder of the first *ghotul*, and is at the centre of the *ghotul*'s culture" (1947). Traditionally, a *ghotul* would have an elder facilitator and young, unmarried boys and girls as its members. The *ghotul* was a system of education and transmission of traditional wisdom and knowledge. The members of a *ghotul* would have lessons in cleanliness, discipline, hard work, taking pride in their appearance, respect for themselves and their elders, and the value of community service. No major social activity could happen in a community without the participation of *ghotul* members, who would participate actively in all village functions from birth, marriage, to death ceremonies.

As Elwin describes: With boys telling stories, asking riddles, reporting daily affairs, planning expeditions and allotment of duties, the *ghotul* is a place embedded in and nurtured by the larger socio-religious landscape of the Gond society – a sacred place where no wrongs can be committed. The message of the *ghotul* – that youth must be served, that freedom and happiness are more to be treasured than any material gain, that friendliness and sympathy, hospitality and unity are of the first importance, and above all that human love – and its physical expression – is beautiful, clean and precious. (1992)

The *ghotul* was also used as a space for village meetings and gatherings. The free intermingling of women and men in *ghotuls* was looked down upon and actively discouraged by outsiders and observers of the dominant religions. As a result, *ghotuls* were largely destroyed and their cultural relevance lost in these parts. The decline of *ghotuls* also meant a decline in the cultural, moral, and spiritual education of the Gond's youth.

This was the reason why Mendha chose the revival of their *gotul* as a symbol of their cultural identity and sovereignty, as their first major struggle on their journey towards self-rule. The villagers decided to assert their *nistar* right and bring teak wood from their forests to build their *ghotul*. *Ghotuls* were traditionally built using teak wood. The extraction of teak from the forests was officially prohibited under colonial forest laws, and permissible only for the Forest Department. The villagers did not seek permission from the Forest Department to assert what they knew were their legitimate *nistar* rights.

On a predetermined day, the villagers went to the forest and collected teak wood to construct their *ghotul*. For the Forest Department, this extraction of teak was a very strong symbol of defiance and a denial of the government's authority. The Forest Department tried to seize the wood but the villagers formed a human chain around it and defended it peacefully. The police was called in; "there were more police than people in the village," as Devaji puts it. As part of their strategy, all men stayed indoors and the women came and faced the police; they politely told them "we will not retaliate

with bullets, nor hit you with stones, in fact we will not hit back at all (…) but if you take this wood away, we would go to the forest and get more and build our *ghotul* again. We will do this every time you destroy our *ghotul*." The Forest Department, however, forcefully took the wood away. In no time, the villagers went back to the forest, got the wood, and rebuilt their *ghotul*. The destruction of the *ghotul* by the Forest Department angered tens of villages in the region, and thirty-two villages which were part of the *zamindari Ilaka* (the area which was traditionally under one erstwhile feudal landlord), of which Mendha was also a part, came together to deliberate on a future course of action. After considering many possibilities, including writing petitions and meeting relevant officials, they decided to take direct action. Twelve of the villages declared that they would build their *ghotul* and on a pre-specified day the villagers marched in large numbers to the forest, harvested teak, and rebuilt the *ghotuls.* The Forest Department, fearing that stopping one village could mobilize thirty-two villages, so stopping twelve villages might mobilize hundreds of villages in the region, refrained from any further action. The *ghotul* still exists in the village as a symbol of their political assertion and village self-rule, although socio-culturally it is not used today as it traditionally was.

In 1987, even while the struggle over the *ghotul* was going on, the study circle was discussing the importance of the forests for the physical and cultural survival of the tribal community. Debates had already started in the village about what the forests meant for them and what should be the right method to manage them and regulate their use. The long-standing lack of tenure security had led to many harmful extraction practices, often causing extensive damage to the forest. The *gram sabha* decided to stop all unregulated use of the forests by its own members and many rules for the protection of the forests were adopted after intense discussions.

Some of these were:

> All of the village's domestic requirements would be met by the surrounding forests without any fee payments to the government or bribes to its local staff.

> Extraction for domestic requirements would be regulated by the *gram sabha*, based on a set of oral rules collectively discussed and adopted.

> The extraction of forest resources (including timber) would only be for personal use and to supplement livelihoods, and not for large scale commercial purposes.

> No outsider, government official, or private individual would be allowed to carry out any activity in the village without the permission of the *gram sabha*.

> Outsiders would need the *gram sabha*'s permission to extract resources. Fines would be imposed on those not complying.

> The voluntary and rotational patrolling of the forest by the villagers, two people per day.

Although the forests were legally still under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department, the village now had de facto control over them. They decided to stop all ongoing commercial activities by outside agencies in their forests, including by the Forest Department and the paper mill. As the descriptions below will reveal, legally there was no space for this assertion by the *gram sabha* but there was nothing that the outsiders could do when faced with the united, strong, and non-violent resistance that the villagers put up whenever their rules were not adhered to.

In 1990, Mendha forced the paper mill to stop bamboo harvesting. The mill, which had a valid license from the government, began suffering heavy losses because of this restriction. The company offered a donation to the villagers and a regular source of employment, among many other perks and incentives, but the villagers remained determined in their position. As many villagers had in the past been employed in these forest extraction activities many of them were economically impacted by their own decision. This, however, did not deter their determination. The lease of the mill expired in 1991; Mendha village wrote to the Chief Minister of the Maharashtra stating that "the bamboo in our forests should not be given to the paper mill without our free prior informed consent. Even if the lease is renewed, we will not let the mill cut the bamboo here." As an alternative they proposed to carry out a bamboo harvest in a regulated and sustainable manner in collaboration with the Forest Department under a newly declared National Policy on forests. Their demands were rejected; Mendha continued to resist and did not let the mill harvest bamboo from their forests. Mendha was among the few villages in the country which was successful in stopping commercial activities by outsiders in their traditional forests, which were legally under government jurisdiction.

THE STRUGGLE FOR INCLUSION IN JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT (JFM)

The national forest policy of India was changed in 1988, and for the first time in the history of Indian forestry it was recognized that the first purpose of forests in the country was to conserve biodiversity and to meet local needs. This was a departure from the earlier policy which had placed "commercial value" as the first charge of the forests. Under this policy, in 1990 a scheme was initiated called the Joint Forest Management (JFM) Scheme, to be implemented by the Forest Department. The objective of this scheme was to regenerate degraded forests through the participation of local people and by sharing the benefits with them. This was arguably the first small step towards any involvement of local people in the management of forests in the country. This scheme, however, was only meant for forests which were already degraded and not forests which were in good condition.

In Mendha, ever since the declaration of self-rule their relationship with the Forest Department and the government had remained non-violently confrontational. At the same time, people's livelihoods had also been impacted by the halt to commercial forestry. Wage labor in forestry operations was one of the few sources of cash income for the villagers. The village would have considered the sustainable harvest of some forest resources themselves but this was not possible due to the harsh, anti-people laws and administrative procedures. The new JFM policy was discussed in the village study circle and it seemed to be the best available policy space for them to resolve their dilemma.

In 1992, when the JFM resolution was adopted by the government of Maharashtra, the scheme was not applicable for districts like Gadchiroli where most of the forests were closed canopy natural forests. Mendha, after intense study circle discussions, sent a proposal to the government to harvest bamboo from their forest in collaboration with the Forest Department under the JFM scheme. This proposal was rejected by the government on the grounds that the scheme was only meant for regenerating degraded forests and not for dense and diverse forests like Mendha's. Mendha continued to write and discuss with the people in charge for months. In August 1993, after sustained perseverance, the policy was finally amended and was extended to Mendha's forests. Mendha thus became the first village with standing dense forest to be brought under this scheme in Gadchiroli district, possibly in the entire state. This also led to a change in policy in general and the scheme was opened up to villages in and around other standing forests in the state. After many discussions the village re-started bamboo extraction from the forests jointly with the Forest Department under this scheme.

This was a significant development considering that at that time JFM was the only policy space allowing for any kind of people's participation in forest management. The scheme itself, however, has been heavily criticized across the country on a number of grounds, including the fact that it does not devolve real decision-making power to people, does not address the issue of access and use rights, and that the people's main role is largely to provide labor in predetermined activities. Many JFM villages have been in conflict with the Forest Department for not honoring promises made under JFM, including those related to benefit sharing. JFM promised to share with the villages 50 percent and above of the profits accruing from all forestry operations, independently of wages. In most cases, this was not done and decades later many villages continue to fight for their rightful share.

Mendha was criticized by many during this time for entering into an arrangement with the government despite knowing their oppressive and unjust strategies and policies. The process of JFM in Mendha, however, was different from that in other parts of the country. In Mendha, the *gram sabha* remained the main decision-making body, and its

wishes would be respected by the Forest Department. The composition of the JFM committee was the same as the *sabha* and included a man and woman from each family. Mendha continued forest management under this scheme until the implementation of the Forest Rights Act in 2006.

THE STRUGGLE TO GAIN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND ADDRESS ADMINISTRATIVE CORRUPTION

Through the study circle discussions, the Mendha villagers also understood that economic empowerment was an important aspect of political empowerment. However, there were few opportunities for a village assembly, established de facto, with no state recognition to empower itself economically. There were numerous government schemes that funded the *Panchayat* (which is the first unit of decision-making in the state administrative system) to implement government programs. A small portion of this fund actually reached the villages for whom it was intended. Mendha's *gram sabha* wrote to the state government asking for the funds meant to be directly given to them for their development. This request was rejected on the grounds that the *gram sabha* was not a legal body. Finally, the village registered an NGO called Village Planning and Development Council, Mendha (Lekha), with the *gram sabha* as its general body and decision-making unit, and after much struggle their proposal was finally accepted. Mendha's *gram sabha* was able to open a bank account and small funds began to be deposited in the account. In order to maintain financial transparency in its own operations, the village put in place certain procedures for its members. These included, for example, all payments made by the *gram sabha* should be made by check and against signed documents. Two people in the village would be assigned (on rotation) to sign the checks, two others to withdraw the money, and another two people to keep an account of withdrawals and receipts. Detailed accounts would be read out in the *gram sabha* regularly and would also be audited by an external auditor.

To stop financial irregularities practiced in government establishments, a decision was taken in the *gram sabha* that citizens of Mendha would not pay any bribes to anyone. In case a payment is made in kind or cash by a member of the *gram sabha*, a receipt would have to be taken. If any payment is made without any supporting document then that person would be liable to deposit an equivalent amount as a fine in the *gram sabha* account. Another huge space for corruption and financial mismanagement in many parts of India is when daily wages are paid under government programs. Often wages paid to the workers are much less than what is shown in the musters for which their signatures are taken. This is usually not contested by the person receiving payments, either because villagers cannot read or write, or they are not shown the documents that they are signing, or they are threatened that they would not be paid at all. Such "cuts" have been a common phenomenon in all government schemes and programs reaching rural India. To overcome this, Mendha took a decision that villagers, when receiving wages

under any government scheme, would not go individually to the government office. Instead, the concerned government functionary is called to the village on a specified day to make the payments when all villagers are present. Mendha's villagers are now well-informed about the importance of checking the details of what they are signing when they accept funds and sign papers. There have been many instances in the village when government functionaries have been made to pay a fine to the *gram sabha* when they were found to be engaging in financial mismanagement in the village.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT AND A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT TOWARDS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act in 2006 created an immense opportunity for forest dwelling communities to be able to transform forest governance in India. However, as mentioned earlier, even ten years on, the implementation of the Act remains abysmally low in most of the country. Gadchiroli district in general and Mendha village in particular have, however, also emerged as leaders in setting milestones towards the implementation of the FRA for themselves and for the country as whole. Gadchiroli district is the only district in the country which has seen an over-60-percent implementation of the FRA. Mendha became the first village in the country to have their CFR rights over 1,800 hectares of their traditional forests recognized in 2009.

A combination of many factors has contributed to the successful implementation of the FRA in Gadchiroli, including collective action from the mobilized *gram sabhas*, supported by effective and collective advocacy and technical input from mass movements and civil society groups, and some responsive and proactive district administrators. Mendha also had a significant role to play in this success. Mendha's experience of filing claims under the FRA and ensuring its implementation led to multiple learning processes at the district and village level in Gadchiroli. The district's study circles focused on understanding and discussing the provisions of the law and its implications for supporting long-standing local struggles for resource use and governance rights. Villages from across the district, state, and other states visited (and continue to visit) Mendha to learn how the claims were filed before initiating similar processes in their own villages.

In the village, however, the struggles for self-rule did not end with the recognition of legal rights under the FRA. In fact, a harder battle related to the actual transfer of power from the state to this small tribal community began in 2009, when Mendha's legal rights over its forests were recognized under the Act. In 2010, the *gram sabha* finally decided to exercise the right to the sustainable harvest and sale of bamboo from their forests, no longer with the Forest Department but on their own. However, under the forest laws the village would still require transit passes from the Forest Department to transport the bamboo outside the village. The village approached the Forest Department to issue

transit passes but the department refused. Instead, the department invited the village to continue to work under the conditions of JFM, with them as daily wage laborers, a suggestion that the village refused. The Forest Department refused to issue transit permits, contending that bamboo was legally considered "timber" under the forest laws and not "Non-Timber Forest Produce" (NTFP), and that the FRA did not allow for rights to fell timber species. Hence, Mendha should not harvest bamboo.

Bamboo patches which Mendha harvested under JFM

Mendha continued to correspond with and petition the Forest Department and the central Ministry of Environment and Forests for the transit permits to be issued. Consequently, the then Minister of Environment and Forests, Mr. Jairam Ramesh, wrote a letter on March 21, 2011 to the then chief minister of the state in which he ordered that the state Forest Department treat bamboo as NTFP and respect the rights of the communities under the FRA. The letter further stated that in areas designated as CFRs, the Forest Departments must give the *gram sabha* the right to issue transit passes for bamboo.

When the situation was not resolved, Mendha decided to take the route of direct political action again. In February 2011, the *gram sabha* declared that one adult from each of the eighty families in the village would go to the forest and extract one bole of bamboo (Pallavi, 2011). They organized a symbolic sale by inviting citizens from across the country to come and buy their bamboo, including people of political and social influence. Subsequently, the Minister of Environment and Forests along with the chief minister of the state visited the village and promised to help resolve the conflict.

Finally on April 27, 2011, the state Forest Department handed over a transit passbook to the village community leaders, signifying that the village *gram sabha* would henceforth exercise the power to harvest and sell bamboo from its CFR, and issue transit passes for transporting the harvested bamboo (DTE, 2011). This event marked the beginning of a change in the bamboo regime in the state and in the country. A national debate created around Mendha's struggle for transit passes was among one of the many debates that led to an intervention from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (responsible for the implementation of the FRA). The rules under the law were amended in July 2012. The amended rules stated that '*the transit permit regime in relation to transportation of minor forest produce shall be modified and given by the Committee*' constituted under Section 4(1)(e) of the Act or the person authorized by the *gram sabha*. Further, the procedural requirement for transit permits would in no way '*restrict or abridge the right to disposal of minor forest produce.*' In August 2014, the Governor of Maharashtra intervened and issued a notification requiring the definition of Non-Timber Forest Produce to be in line with the FRA by cancelling the provisions under the colonial forest laws Section 2-vii of the IFA, where bamboo was listed as a tree), bringing an end to a colonial legacy. Over a period of time, many other changes were brought about in the state laws to facilitate the exercise of rights by the *gram sabha*s. These significant changes related to the harvest of forest produce and the management of CFRs to strengthen local livelihoods and economies. Mendha-Lekha's successful struggle has inspired hundreds of villages across the country to claim and assert their rights over bamboo and other forest produce to change not only forest governance but local economic discourse and debates.

During their first commercial harvest in April 2011, villagers sold bamboo at Rs. 23/- per pole, a rate higher than the highest price the Forest Department had ever sold the bamboo for. By the next season in 2012, villagers had already worked out a detailed system of harvesting, monitoring, and selling based on existing systems at the Forest Department, local knowledge systems, and outside experts. They again sought help from the Forest Department to make the trade transparent and prevent exploitation by contractors and market forces; help was refused again. Not discouraged, the village continued with its discussions on rules and regulations for bamboo harvests and wildlife conservation. They insisted that these rules and regulations must be followed by the contractors seeking tenders for bamboo harvesting in their forests. After rejecting the highest bidder who was not ready to adhere to the conditions of sustainability, they identified someone who would. The *gram sabha* appointed four village elders (women and men) who had long participated in the forest struggle to supervise and monitor the process of extraction. Mendha villagers provided the work force and for additional help people from neighboring villages were employed. All involved in the process were paid wages by the *gram sabha* at rates much higher than the Forest Department's e.g. Rs. 13/- per full-length pole (not more than fifty poles a day were allowed to be harvested). This was much higher than

the Forest Department's rate of Rs. 13/- per bundle of twenty poles. These high rates were largely used to pay the workers, unlike in the case of the Forest Department where most of the money went into administrative expenses and corruption. At the end of the season, Mendha organized a two day *gram sabha* meeting to finalize the accounts of the harvest and sale. After making payments to all those who participated in the harvest in any capacity (which included almost all villagers and neighboring villagers), Mendha's *gram sabha* earned over Rs. 5,000,000 in the very first year of harvest. The villagers decided to invest the money and use the interest for village and forest development in the future. The commercial but regulated system of harvest and monitoring established by Mendha became an inspiration for other villages. After a period of time, the Forest Department also started using Mendha as a training site for their staff in bamboo management.

After the initial years of harvesting, Mendha's *gram sabha* decided not to continue with the bamboo harvest but to move towards forest management. This would mean a shift from a large-scale harvest in the season to a needs-based harvest throughout the year. They decided to focus instead on management and conservation activities such as bamboo clump management, soil and moisture conservation, mulching, fire protection, and plantations. These activities were included in the village development and forest management strategies and linked to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) program set up by the government of India. This ensured that villagers would have an opportunity to earn throughout the year while working on their village and forest management activities. Simultaneously, Mendha's *gram sabha* has now appointed a team of villagers to prepare a written development, conservation, and management plan. Experts from outside like Dr. Madhav Gadgil, a renowned ecologist, have been requested to guide the process. The Mendha experience in the management and governance of forests has already been used to produce a set of guidelines (*Margdarshika*), with support from the Vidharba Statutory Development Board, for other villages who want to follow a similar process.

A UNIQUE JOURNEY FROM PRIVATE PROPERTY TO A COMMON PROPERTY RESOURCE

At a time when the entire world is moving towards the privatization of common property resources and land grabbing is a global phenomenon, Mendha took a revolutionary step away from both of these in keeping with its ideology that land, water, and forests are common property resources and must be used sustainably and equitably distributed. In 2013, Mendha's *gram sabha* declared itself a *Gram Daan* village, with 100 percent consensus, using a little known Act called the Maharashtra Gram Daan Act, 1964. Consequently, all privately owned property in Mendha is now under the collective ownership of the *gram sabha*. The *gram sabha* is the owner of all land and resources in the village. With this declaration, Mendha became one of the twenty villages in the entire state to do so.

Some of the main features of a *Gram Daan* village under the Act include:

> The ownership of all individually owned land is to be surrendered to the *gram sabha*.

> 5 percent of land owned by individual landowners is to be contributed towards a village land pool, to be given to the landless in the community.

> The farmer who surrenders the land is legally referred to as a *gram daani* farmer. The *gram daani* farmer continues to cultivate his/her land. This land can be passed on to the next generation of the farmer but the ownership of the land rests with the *gram sabha*.

> The land however cannot be sold.

> As per the Act, if 75 percent of the families in the village agree to declare the village a *Gram Daan* village it can be declared a *Gram Daan* village.

> Once a *gram sabha* has taken a decision to enact a *Gram Daan* and if it is part of a group *gram Panchayat*, then it acquires an independent status and the *Gram Mandal* (same as a *gram sabha*) becomes the basic decision-making unit and administrative functionary. This implies that Mendha's *gram sabha* is no longer under the *Panchayat*, even legally and administratively, but is an independent body.

> At the state level there is a *Gram Daan* board to look after the matters concerning *Gram Daan* villages.

Mendha had started discussing the subject of *Gram Daan* when it was first introduced to the village by Mohan in the study group discussions in 1985-86. By late 2006, over 80 percent of families had already agreed in favor of the *Gram Daan*. However, keeping with its principle of consensus, the *gram sabha* decided not to move further till 100 percent of families had agreed. The matter continued to be discussed. Finally, 100 percent of families agreed in favor of the *Gram Daan* but then it was realized that the consensus only included people above 18 years. The process then started again to discuss the issue with people between the age of 14 and 18. These discussions were held in smaller youth groups, with girls and boys. This group also agreed and finally the *Gram Daan* was declared in a meeting with all the government revenue and administrative officials in 2013.The village has already drafted a set of rules for itself, which have been approved by the state *Gram Daan* board, as procedurally required. The village is currently waiting for a letter confirming its status and its independence from the *Panchayat* that it is currently a part of.

SELF-RELIANCE AND A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

Through its struggles, debates, discussions, and transformative processes, including evolving institutional structures and systems, the village has been able to achieve political empowerment, gender equity, secured livelihoods, economic independence, food security, secured access to natural resources, and cultural and ecological security.

ACHIEVING ECOLOGICAL SECURITY THROUGH FOREST CONSERVATION

The governance, management, and conservation of forests are among the important pillars of Mendha village's self-rule. To ensure that forests are not over-exploited, the village follows a system of forest patrols in which four people from different households contribute to forest protection every day. This is on a rotation basis and one of the voluntary activities that every household has to contribute towards. Patrolling teams ensure that there are no fires, extraction without permission by outsiders, or unregulated use by the villagers themselves. The village *Patel* (traditional head) provides free passes to people for the extraction of Non-Timber Forest Produce and fuel wood as per the *gram sabha*'s decisions. The penalty for offenses is subject to the nature of the offense and the economic status of the offender; fines can be paid in cash or kind. In case of forest fires, which are common in summer, the entire village voluntarily helps to put out the fire. This is particularly important also because the village has created plantations in the open patches in the forest, taking advantage of funds available through various government schemes. These plantations stock the forest with local species and also provide the people with employment.

Mendha's *gram sabha* has also decided to keep 10 percent of its forest completely untouched as the village's biodiversity reserves. No extraction of any kind is allowed on these patches of forest. Dedicated to the local deity Pen Geda (God's forest), these patches are locally referred to as Konalkadiya, Sailandongar, and Penmetta. The objective is to safeguard wildlife which may otherwise be disturbed by resource extraction activities undertaken for local livelihoods. Specific rules have been formulated to ensure the protection of this forest and the wildlife within.

Livestock grazing is also collectively managed, with two people per day on a rotation basis taking on the responsibility. A reminder is given to the person who will be going the next day by placing a stick in front of her/his house. An important issue that faces the *gram sabha* currently, and which often comes up in study circle discussions, is that of the increasing goat population. The number of goats in the village has increased as it is a good economic option for people (Rs 400/kg for the sale of a goat). This, however,

has also started putting pressure on the forest and is a matter of concern for the *gram sabha* which is currently being discussed.

A group of girls and boys in Mendha, with help from Dr. Madhav Gadgil (a renowned scientist), were engaged in a year-long study as part of a study circle tasked with drafting a community biodiversity register. These youths remain active and often engage in sharing this knowledge with other neighboring villages. This existing information is currently being used by another team to prepare a management plan for their forests, also with help from Dr. Gadgil.

FINANCIAL SECURITY OF THE COLLECTIVE THROUGH ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Mendha has never been reliant on external funders and non-government agencies for funding. They have always struggled and ensured that peoples' livelihoods are ensured through various government schemes, which are part of the state-allocated development funds coming to the region. Additionally, Mendha's *gram sabha* receives funds under various government projects that they put into their village, e.g. a project on soil and moisture conservation or funds received from the Tribal Development Department for collective irrigation projects. To create a common pool of funds for collective actions a decision was taken to contribute 10 percent of the earnings from all job opportunities created by the *gram sabha* into the *gram sabha* account. Minor amounts are also generated by those who visit the village through voluntary contributions towards their stay.

As mentioned above, by providing ownership rights to the villagers over forests and forest produce within their customary boundary, the FRA strengthened the village economy, as a collective and for individuals. The over Rs. 5,000,000 that the village earned in 2011-12 (following the deduction of wages and other expenses) from the extraction of bamboo from their forests were deposited in the *gram sabha* account and the interest generated from this is sometimes used for village management and governance activities. Another important commercial produce that is harvested from the forest is *tendu patta* (leaves harvested for making a local cigarette called *bidi*). The forests of Gadchiroli are rich in *tendu* trees. These leaves are auctioned by the *gram sabha* to traders when trade is opened for fifteen days in summer. The traders pay wages to villagers who are involved in the collection of the leaves and a royalty to the *gram sabha*. Part of this royalty is distributed back to the collectors while the remaining amount is retained by the *gram sabha* for village and forest development activities. The funds generated from these various sources are deposited in the *gram sabha* account.

LIVELIHOOD SECURITY FOR THE PEOPLE

The livelihoods of the people are extensively dependent on farming and forest produce. Sufficient water throughout the year ensures a good agricultural harvest. The village follows the principle that water is a common property resource and, irrespective of where it is found, it belongs to all in the village. This policy has helped ensure an equitable water distribution system in the village. A supplementary source of income for the villagers is the extraction and sale of non-timber forest produce such as leaves, flowers, bamboo, honey, among others. In the past, these products were harvested from the forest and sold independently, leaving people at the mercy of buyers who would exploit the situation knowing that collectors were desperate to sell. These products are now collected in a regulated manner, based on the *gram sabha*'s decisions, with many of the products now being bought from the individual collectors by the *gram sabha*. The *gram sabha* identifies the right time and market for the produce and sells it collectively. The profits are given back to the collectors. This has ensured better prices and a non-exploitative environment for the villagers. Non-timber forest produce like *tendu* leaves and bamboo earn very high revenues and are bought by contractors. The negotiations and the sale of these are carried out by the *gram sabha*, which also earns royalties from the sale; the villagers get a daily wage payment from the contractor and subsequently also a share of the profit.

In addition to this, if employment is needed the village has taken the unique step of combining a government program called the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS) with village governance and forest management activities. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 (MNREGA) was aimed at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing one hundred days of waged employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work (Ministry of Rural Development, 2005). Although well-intentioned, this scheme, implemented by various government agencies, has been often criticized for immense financial misappropriation, and creating employment through activities that are not necessarily useful for people. Mendha, however, managed to obtain a special Government Resolution that ensures that the *gram sabha* and not the *Panchayat* will be the implementing agency for the MNREGA. Consequently, a committee was constituted in the village in 2011 which identifies jobs to be undertaken in the village. These jobs are based on the village and forest development and conservation activities identified by the *gram sabha*. The first work to be undertaken was watershed development in 2012. The *gram sabha* appoints a coordinator (*Rojgar Sevak*) on a rotation basis who, along with the committee, prepares an estimate of the work needed in the village and creates a muster roll. The coordinator then coordinates with the concerned government agency to finalize the project

and to receive funds. These funds are transferred directly into the *gram sabha*'s account and used to pay those employed through this. Through its effective use of funds the *gram sabha* has ensured employment to anyone who requests a job on any particular day of the year (if needed). This is unlike other areas where only a few people get employment for 100 days in a year. A fixed daily wage is paid for all the activities thus undertaken. Through this, Mendha-Lekha has also managed to address one of the most pressing issues faced by many rural areas in India, distress and out-migration due to unemployment, enabling people to stay in the village to work on various developments for better village governance and natural resource management. Youths are also engaged as and when needed in activities related to village governance, such as managing paper work, accounts, hospitality, among others.

Mendha's *gram sabha* has always attempted to take advantage of various government development schemes meant for the villagers. Unlike in other villages, where all government support agencies work as independent units, bringing few benefits to few beneficiaries and opening up a huge space for favors and corruption, Mendha has collectively taken responsibility to ensure that all schemes are used for equitable benefit and with total transference. They believe that government funds are our own tax funds and should be utilized by us. The first steps towards this were taken in 1996-97 after a few discussions between villagers and some outside members in a study circle. Following this discussion, the village invited all local government agencies (represented by their concerned officers) to attend a joint meeting in the village. A *gram sabha* was held for the purpose and during the meeting the villagers asked the government representatives to put down in writing (on a blackboard) exactly how much money was available under each department for village development activities. By following this system the village ensured a closer coordination among all agencies and also the improved delivery of beneficiary and welfare schemes to the village. Many years later, in 2014, the government of Maharashtra made it a policy to follow a similar convergence of resources from different government agencies to the villages which have received CFR rights for village development and forest conservation.

SOCIAL SECURITY FOR THE PEOPLE

Amongst the less highlighted but very significant aspects of Mendha's efforts has been the securing of social security for its citizens. Active participation by women in village decision-making and study circle discussions as well as in all the action sub-committees has led to their empowerment, and consequently their voices being heard. Women collectives (Self-Help Groups) have been formed which ensure that women are protected against domestic violence and also ensure their economic empowerment. Collective assets such as the village tractor and a stone quarry are managed by the

women's group, which also earns profits from these activities (the tractor can be hired by people from within the village as well as from outside).

Realizing that people are most prone to exploitation in times of distress, the village has taken a few important decisions. One of them is the establishment of a grain bank. The grains are contributed to the bank by all villagers soon after the harvest. These can then be borrowed by anyone in times of scarcity or when the crops fail for any reason. Whoever borrows grain has to return an amount that is slightly more than that borrowed, when they are in a position to do so.

The second important step has been the establishment of a village loaning system. Tribal and forest-dependent people across India are exploited as they are often forced to take loans from money lenders in times of scarcity. These people often get into a never-ending cycle of exploitation, with ever-increasing interest rates. In some situations children end up still bonded to the moneylenders for loans that their parents may have taken out. To avoid such exploitation, Mendha's *gram sabha* offers a financial loan to anyone who needs money. For the first year no interest is charged; in the second year a 2 percent interest rate is charged, and over a period of time the rate of interest increases nominally. The Self-Help Group that the villagers are part of ensures that such a loan is offered in needy times and also ensures that the loans are returned in due time.

Although medical facilities are provided to tribal communities free of charge in government hospitals, often villagers do not have the money for extreme health emergencies, which can only be treated in private hospitals. The *gram sabha* also provides financial support to the villagers in such extreme situations.

Since agriculture is an important mainstay of the people, the decision that all underground and surface water in the village belongs to the collective is very important for Mendha. This decision ensures that water is available to all, irrespective of where it is present. Mendha's *gram sabha* has built many check dams on individual and village common lands for soil and moisture conservation, to ensure ground water recharge. The *gram sabha* has constructed over 1,000 galli plugs, seventeen farm ponds, one forest pond and one community well to recharge water and provide water to all.

Amongst the most significant actions that the village has taken in recent times has been declaring the land in the village (community owned or privately owned) to be the village commons under the Gram Daan Act of Maharashtra (please see above for details).

Most importantly, Medha's *gram sabha* ensures equal benefits and welfare for all in the village – in the *gram sabha* young and old, men and women, poor and rich all have equal opportunities. Future plans of the village include: the move towards 100 percent

organic agriculture and growing native crops; the revival of the fast eroding *Gondi* language, culture, and traditions; the tackling of soil erosion through regulated grazing; the establishment of a federation of *gram sabhas* in the region, and to restore an education system which is informed by traditional systems such as the *ghotul* and the modern education system.

Nursery of Mendha Lekha

CONTEXTUALISING MENDHA'S TRANSFORMATION

MENDHA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE

Mendha's slogan "*Dilli Mumbai Hamari Sarkar Hamare gaon main ham he sarkar*" defines Mendha's relationship with the state. The villagers hold themselves responsible for the state and consider themselves a part of it. They believe that governance is a combination of direct democracy and accountable representative governance. Elected representatives are not decision-makers but carriers of concerns and decisions taken through the platforms of direct democracy (in this case the *gram sabha*) to the appropriate levels. Decisions taken at the district, state, or national level should be based on the decisions taken at the village *gram sabhas* or other localities.

The main actors in the village believe that the citizens of any democratic representative government are directly responsible for the kind of government they elect. If the elected government at the center of the state is exploitative, then it indicates that we as the government in our villages and localities are weak. Strengthening our power in

our villages and localities through direct democracy is the only way we can contribute towards improving governments at state and national level. This however is not a struggle that a single village can undertake. To transform the political establishment at the state and district level, to make it more accountable to the people who elect them, each village has to transform and empower itself. A struggle without addressing intrinsic internal weaknesses and inequities cannot bring about a long-term political transformation toward justice and equity. Only the collective of empowered *gram sabhas* and localities can transform representative governance.

With this ideology, they have never rejected the idea of the state or the role of the state even while disagreeing with the centralized functioning and extractive policies of the state. Their relationship with the state has been non-violently confrontational because of the state's political and economic agenda, yet where possible they have negotiated and collaborated with state agencies. They have utilized all possible government schemes and programs as long as these did not contradict *gram sabha*'s own rules, systems, principles, and decisions. In their relationship with the state, therefore, they have kept the political power within their village in their own hands, and have strived to get the state to respect and adhere to village decisions, either by coercion, collaboration, dialogue, or resistance.

MENDHA AND THE POLITICAL LEFT

As mentioned in the introduction to this case study, Mendha's struggle is rooted in a district-level movement which itself was catalyzed by socialist mobilizing. Gadchiroli district (along with many other neighboring districts and states) has also been under the influence of the People's War Group since the 1970s. Often referred to as the Maoists, these armed groups support the vision of tribal self-determination and self-rule in these areas. Claiming their resistance to be against feudalist, fascist, capitalist, imperialist, and corrupt forces leading to injustices against the local tribal and non-tribal communities, they see the current form of government as the highest manifestations of these. Their presence is cited by the government of India as a reason for the heavy militarization of this region. For decades there has been an uncomfortable co-existence between socialist and Gandhian civil-society groups and the left-wing extremist groups in the district. Their positions vis à vis each other range from a complete rejection of each other's approaches to an agreement on ideologies but disagreement about the means of achieving the goals. Mendha, like many other villages in this region, has often been caught in the conflict between government forces, socialist ideologues, and the armed Maoists, accused by each group to be aligning with the other. Mendha, while it strongly believes in the ideology of village self-determination, has never agreed with the violent means of achieving this. Non-violence has been one of the core values and strengths of Mendha's struggle.

The point of contention between Mendha and the Maoists has been Mendha's slogan. The Maoists, while agreeing with the second half of Mendha's slogan (WE are the government in our village), completely reject the first half (OUR government is in Delhi and Mumbai). The current form of government for them is oppressive, does not represent the interest of the oppressed, and is hence unacceptable. As explained by Devaji and Mohanbhai, Mendha, while not in agreement with the current form of governance (representative governance) must take the responsibility as others for having brought it to power or not having been able to change it. Mendha, therefore, has always negotiated and collaborated with the government wherever possible, even while resisting where needed – an approach that the Maoists reject. Amongst the strongest oppositions that Mendha faced from these groups was when it decided to file legal claims over their forests under the Forest Rights Act. The Maoists claimed that tribal communities including Mendha already had forest rights (unlawfully taken over by the state) and Mendha had successfully asserted them. Mendha didn't need an oppressive and capitalist state's concurrence or the legal acceptance of their rights. Both sides have largely maintained their positions and a respectful distance from each other.

In the past, Mendha's largely successful struggle in such a conflicting environment has often been intriguing for many. Government agencies were often suspicious that they are associated with the Maoists, while the others have wondered why despite such resistance the police have not used its indirect oppressive strategies in Mendha, something which is common in other villages in this region, particularly in those resisting the government's extractivist plans and policies.

In recent years, within the struggles influenced by the non-armed left ideologies in the region, Mendha has been criticized for collaborating with the state even when the state's corrupt, unjust, and extractive motives are clear. At the present time, Gadchiroli district is in a state of flux. On the one hand it has the distinction of being a district with the highest number of village communities who now have control over their forests under the Forest Rights Act. On the other hand, the government continues to issue and propose leases to mining corporations and other industries, in complete violation of the policy of free prior informed consent (Pathak Broome & Raut, 2017). While hundreds of villages are now devising strategies and plans for forest-based livelihoods, strengthening themselves and their *gram sabhas* through the trade of forest produce which till recently was under state monopoly, the state continues the narrative that mining and industry bring employment and development to the region. A resistance movement is currently brewing in the district against these leases. In this context Mendha's position has not emerged very clearly. Mendha has been part of district-level study circles on forest rights and mining and continues to emphasize the

importance of study circles to have more informed and widely discussed strategies. Those involved in the resistance feel that study circles are important but that these are also times for more direct action, like Mendha has taken in its past struggles. They find Mendha's support in such confrontational direct actions wanting. With its agenda of pushing mining in the district, the state continues its covert and overt pressure tactics on villagers and activists involved in anti-extractivism resistance. A common strategy of the state to do so is by branding them as anti-development, anti-national, and as supporters of the banned armed left-wing groups. Mendha faces the accusation that it, along with other villages which often collaborate with the state, finds it difficult to take a clear position against the state in such situations.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN MENDHA'S TRANSFORMATION

As described in in the section about Mendha's journey to self-empowerment, in the initial stages of its struggle the action research undertaken with Mohan and Savita played an important role in Mendha's initiative. The traditional village square discussions morphed and evolved into study circles, turning into an opportunity for a large number of people from outside to interact with the village. According to Mohan, there are two very significant kinds of roles that outsiders have played in this initiative. One has been his own consistent and catalytic association as part of the study group, which he calls his "collaborator friends," and then a larger network of government and non-government actors who stay associated as a large support network, or "Friends of Mendha." Both these external actors have played a critical role in the entire process. Most help from outside actors has been in the sphere of knowledge-generation through study circles and sometimes in the implementation of some activities such as drafting Community Biodiversity Registers, financial accounting, the use of technology such as cameras, computers, the internet etc. Outsiders, however, are strictly prohibited from intervening in any decision-making processes, which are the exclusive prerogative of the citizens of Mendha.

Mendha has consciously and strategically avoided any financial dependence on NGOs and external funding agencies. Funding has been mobilized through its effective use of government funds, and programs allocated by the state for tribal development in the region. Instead of leaving the government agencies to implement these schemes, Mendha has either de facto or through official means taken charge of these funds, schemes, and programs to implement them as per the *gram sabha*'s decisions. These funds are in addition to the *gram sabha*'s own earnings through the sale of forest produce, donations by visitors, and voluntary contributions by the villagers.

THE HURDLES MENDHA FACES

Apart from the challenges emerging from state laws and policies which have been a running thread throughout Mendha's struggle, amongst the strongest challenges that Mendha has faced have been from its immediate neighbors. Mendha's conflicts with its immediately neighboring villages began soon after its declaration of self-rule and the announcement of their governance structure with its rules and regulations. Mendha's forests have been customarily used by neighboring villages. Over the years, as the forests of these villages gradually depleted, often through cultivation (outside the legal system), dependence on Mendha's forests gradually increased. Many of these villages also depended on daily wage employment in commercial activities undertaken by the state and the paper mill. In the process of announcing their rules and regulations for the management and governance of forests, Mendha's *gram sabha* invited its neighbors to join in the effort. Neighboring villages would be allowed customary use of the forests as long as they informed the *gram sabha* and followed all rules of regulated use as decided by the *gram sabha.* This assertion of power was not acceptable to the neighboring villages. The discontent of the neighboring villages was actively encouraged by the Forest Department which asserted that the forests belonged to the state. The forest staff continued to take bribes and provide indirect support to those who would violate Mendha's rules. Mendha's *gram sabha* held many discussions with the *gram sabhas* of its neighboring villages to explain their position but without much success. Over the years this also became one of the major factors alienating the village youth from the *gram sabha*. The village's young people found themselves taunted as "the self-rule wala" in the local markets, schools, and other public spaces. The situation for Mendha changed after the Forest Rights Act was implemented and their rights were legally recognized. The significance of Mendha's resistance began to make sense and neighboring villages started the process of claiming their rights. Mendha continues to maintain the position that neighboring villages with customary access are allowed in their forests as long as they also use them responsibly and follow the principles of sustainability. In order to resolve their long-standing conflict with the neighboring villages, Mendha has now started a process of dialogue with the traditional institutions and leaders in their *Ilaka*. On the other hand, with most villages receiving access, use, and management rights under the FRA, the neighbors now understand Mendha's struggle better. In recent years, over thirty villages have come together to form a regional federation as a support group for constituent *gram sabhas* to manage and govern their customary forests.

In recent years, major challenges have emerged in the form of market forces and contractors involved in forest trade. A contractor *raj* (rule) flourished during the Forest Department's exploitation of forests. Contractors enjoyed many privileges, much freedom and high profits by winning favors from the forest staff. An informal economy meant high profits for contractors, heavy bribes for forest officials, a loss

of revenue for the state exchequer, and low wages for the forest workers. These contractors now have to work with Mendha, with all its transparency, rules, and regulations. A contractors' lobby in the district is now ensuring that villages like Mendha which insist on transparent processes do not find a market for their produce or their produce is sold at a lower price at auctions. Many unsuspecting *gram sabhas* where internal processes are not very strong are providing easy resources for the lobby. Facing difficulties in accessing the market for their produce and being undercut by the contractors, Mendha village, along with many others in the district, has already submitted petitions to the government for them to implement a minimum support price mechanism to stop such exploitation. While action from the government remains pending Mendha and a district-level study circle continue to contemplate their next course of action.

CONCLUSION

Mendha's journey has been a continuous, dynamic, and dialectical relationship between struggle and alternatives; non-violent opposition and cooperation; rejection and negotiation. Each struggle has led to the emergence of alternatives not just for the village but for a larger community, often with national-level implications. These include changes in the Joint Forest Management Policy, policies related to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 and the process related to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 of the Government of India. Mendha's struggle includes implementing existing legal and policy measures, the struggle to change or amend such laws when they do not support the decisions of the village, and to implement their decisions even when such laws and policies do not exist.

The factors underlying Mendha's successful struggle include: its detailed and open study circle discussions which are held for a requisite length of time; well-informed consensus-based decisions (no consensus, no decision); equal opportunities for all, including women in decision-making and the implementation of decisions; non-violent action; its ability to garner solidarity and support from a larger community, ranging from villages in the district, to individuals, and groups from across the country.

Among the most important and unique aspects of Mendha's efforts have been the study circles which have enabled villagers to completely understand a situation before adopting strategies to deal with it. This has helped them in analyzing and understanding government schemes, policies, and laws in such a way that they have been able to use and implement them for their own benefit while retaining decision-making powers. Consequently, many schemes and programs which have been criticized for

being top-down and/or corrupt elsewhere have been used in Mendha in their own unique way, including JFM and the MNREGA. Mendha, however, believes that no initiative can ever be replicated or up-scaled. Each situation, context, culture and people involved are different. Initiatives like Mendha's are meant to be learnt from in order to develop one's own unique initiative depending on one's own local situations.

While Mendha continues to face hurdles from market forces, it is also facing criticism from some quarters for not supporting the struggles against mining in the region. With over 1,000 villages whose Forest Rights have been recognized, and *gram sabhas* in the region earning much more from their forests than any government develop-ment and beneficiary schemes could provide, the region once again faces threats to these forests from over twenty-five proposed mining leases, one of which has already started operating. Whilst on the one hand various regional *gram sabha* federations are emerging, on the other, forests are facing the threat of being diverted for mining once again.

Even as this case study is being written, Gadchiroli appears to be standing at the same point today where it was in the 1980s when the Gadchiroli Movement started. The difference today is that the *gram sabhas* are stronger, but so are the economic and extractive powers. What role Mendha will play in this state of flux, and whether this is an opportunity for thousands of Mendhas to emerge or for the market economy powers to win, the times ahead will unfold.

GLOSSARY OF LOCAL WORDS USED

Zamindar	Landlord
Begar	Free labor
Panchyat	Village executive - Officially the first unit of decision-making under the Panchayati Raj System of India
Patel	Village head appointed by the British in tribal areas to liaise with people
Nistar Patrak	Record of usufruct rights
Kahdi	Bribe
Sarkari	Belonging to the government
Andolan	People's Resistance Movement
Poojari	Priest
Gaita	Traditional priest in Gond villages
Sarpanch	Elected head of a Panchayat
Ghotul	A traditional structure and system for youths in Gond villages
Koya	Human (Gonds sometimes refer to themselves by this name)
Patwari	Local land record officer
Ilaka	Unit of area under a certain landlord during British rule

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BARCELONA EN COMÚ: THE MUNICIPALIST MOVEMENT TO SEIZE THE INSTITUTIONS

Mauro Castro

INTRODUCTION

On May 15, 2011, mass rallies and occupations eclipsed Spain's major cities. The date is widely considered the birth moment of the "Indignado movement", also known as the "15M". While it is quite difficult to measure the wider impact of the 15M, one of its very tangible achievements, i.e. one of the direct translations of its social unrest and indignation, is to have triggered the victory of "citizen platforms" across Spain in the municipal elections of 2015 – one of the major experiments in electoral democracy in Europe's recent political history. In less than a year, various platforms – most of them with no previous experience in electoral politics – succeeded in winning elections in some of the bigger municipalities (Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, and Coruña, among others). In fact, citizen-based electoral platforms emerged in almost every city and every village. In some cases, they joined governments as coalition partners (e.g. in Valencia and Badalona, a city in the metropolitan area of Barcelona), and in many others they are currently opposition forces. Also part of the post-15M idea of so-called "new politics" (nueva política) is Podemos, the left-wing political party that was launched in Madrid and established a nationwide presence (with the vision of seizing the Spanish nation-state as its central aim) in parallel with the municipalist wave.[1]

The aim of this text is to offer an understanding of the movement's mutation into what has been termed an "institutional takeover". It will focus in particular on the potentialities and limitations of municipal politics, and discuss the open possibilities of "Radical Municipalism" in changing political power relations in the city. It will also look at what kind of strategies are needed to create and sustain a shared project based on a broad and expansive social movement that does not define itself purely in terms of its electoral and institutional aspirations. For the left, this is a classic question to which I want to humbly add my concrete and vivid local perspective.

Barcelona en Comú (Catalan for "Barcelona in Common"), epitomizes the recent rise of social movements to institutional power in the country. It is a citizen platform created to become an elected institutional body in the municipality and a platform for a variety of social movements in the city. The expectation among many is that this initiative will open up opportunities to redistribute wealth, fight for social achievements, and deepen democracy by linking institutional policy-making with social mobilization.

My analysis will draw on the concept of the political cycle (Rodríguez, 2016) with its three distinct moments (which will be more or less present throughout the analysis). These three stages will provide a useful framework to better grasp how the movement

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1   This new political force, which also claimed to have its roots in the 15M movement, witnessed an unexpected electoral surge in May 2014, landing 6 seats in the European Parliament. Moreover, in 2014–2015, local groups of Podemos would end up joining municipal citizens' platforms in many towns and cities. However, it is important to stress that municipalist platforms and Podemos are in most cases two different political actors.

was created, and how it has evolved over time, exposed to different conjunctures and challenges. This historical framework will also enable an understanding of how the emergence of Barcelona en Comú has (re)defined the "(new) rules of the game", and how its approaches were subsequently replicated in other cities across Spain.

The political cycle comprises:

> The movement phase: The political cycle was initiated by the peaceful democratic upheavals of May 15, 2011. This was a true "event" (to use Alain Badiou's term) to the extent that it catalyzed a series of mobilizations and collective experiences.

> The municipalist hypothesis, or political party-phase: The second moment involves organizing an "institutional strategy" (*apuesta institucional*), or "seizing the institutions" *(tomar las instituciones)*. This stage is characterized by higher degrees of organization and oriented towards the creation of new political instruments: electoral platforms constituted by citizens and new political parties.

> The institutional phase. The third stage is characterized by governance, or the institutionalization of some part of the movement, and based on the recovery of the State as a sovereign instrument to implement politics.

THE INDIGNADO MOVEMENT AT AN IMPASSE

The 15M or Indignado movement marked the tipping point of the current political cycle, a critical moment that had been long in the making. Since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008, Spain has gone through truly exceptional times that have culminated in the imposition of austerity measures, exposed broad segments of society to increasing impoverishment and rising unemployment, and eroded the political legitimacy of dominant parties and unions. Social movements formed in response to these dynamics. 15M catalyzed these and engendered an enormous extension of the movement in subsequent years, including the spread of neighborhood assemblies and movements in defense of social rights such as healthcare or education.

When established political institutions appeared immune against the proposals for change, the movement turned an economic and social crisis into a political crisis, a challenge to the political system, by attempting to take over the very institutions it had wanted to reform. In this section I will describe the core elements of the 15M or Indignado movement and contextualize the political impasse that led to the strategy of standing for public office.

THE ORIGINS OF A DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

The 15M was a peaceful and democratic uprising that began with occupations of the squares of major Spanish cities on May 15, 2011, a week prior to local elections. It started as a small, inarticulate, and youth-centered movement that was both a massive outcry against austerity and a challenge to the very foundations of representative democracy. Calls for "Real Democracy Now" and famous slogans such as "They don't represent us", "They call it democracy, but it's not that", "We are not commodities in the hands of bankers and politicians", or "It's not left or right, it's the ones at the bottom against the ones on top" pointed towards a sort of non-ideological politics articulated beyond traditional party lines and a critique of the state as the monopolist of the political. The word that encapsulated the movement's central demand was a classic term that no one would have suspected would experience a revolutionary revival: democracy (Rodríguez, 2016).

Another new element introduced by the 15M was the idea that politics was not the exclusive business of representatives and experts, but a sphere in which ordinary citizens can get involved. Women and men of different ages occupied the squares not only to say that the system was broken, but also in order to practice direct democracy: to share, talk, and listen to each other, to debate, and to learn. And many of those participants had no previous experience in terms of political engagement. In this way, people expressed in the squares the need to reinvent democracy, to reclaim it. Through that collective experience, people became aware of their own strength and their potential capacity as a collective force to question and challenge the causes of injustice that aggravate them. (Charnock et al., 2012)

However, the 15M movement was not limited to the physical occupation of squares. It also had an important virtual dimension, with social networks such as Twitter and Facebook acting as its main connectors. These media channels had a clear public and external layer, and were used mainly as platforms for free speech, and to mobilize and organize protests.

Some have called this a "post-mediated public sphere" beyond the mainstream media, a sphere in which the movement's calls were circulated, where slogans were shared, and activists tested the general climate and their political proposals. (Toret, 2013). The increasing use of social networks came to displace the more political and experimental projects that had previously emerged, such as the Web 2.0 (with Indymedia as the main example), or the blogosphere.

The 15M strongly politicized its supporters, and quickly sparked a widespread sense of affinity. The official surveys published at the time in the mainstream media revealed that almost two-thirds of the population were sympathetic towards the protesters. The enormous size and scale of the mobilizations and their peaceful character, the social composition of the revolt's protagonists (the young and the precarious middle-class), as

well as the strong opposition against the imposed austerity policies helped to generate a broad consensus. "Reclaiming democracy" was something that a large part of the population identified with.

15M Demonstration, 2011

The sheer reach and growth of the 15M movement reveals that the process was not something triggered by social movements alone. Certainly, it cannot be explained without accounting for the militant work and the constant contributions of these active minorities. However, it also contained something radically "new" and fresh, something that went beyond the parameters of previous mobilizations and shattered the legitimacy of the political regime, in other words, of the structures that had hitherto been considered vital: the system of parliamentary democracy which had emerged after the end of the Francoist dictatorship in 1975, the Spanish Constitution, the party system and its main institutions, as well as conventional political grammar, etc. (Collado, 2016).

Gradually, inspired by the aura of May 2011, there emerged a constellation of local movements. These included groups protesting against austerity policies and the privatization of public services (healthcare, education, transport, water and energy supply) known as *mareas* ("tides"), and more transversal movements demanding radical changes regarding, for instance, the transformation of mechanisms of representation ("real democracy"), public debt audits, or stricter public control over banking practices and corruption, etc. One of the stronger grassroots movements of this period was the PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* / Mortgage Victims Platform), which after

eight years (PAH was founded in February 2009 in Barcelona) is still fighting to change Spanish mortgage legislation that forces the (often evicted) borrowers to continue to repay their debt after foreclosure.

THE *GLASS CEILING* AND THE *WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY*

Nevertheless, after more than two years of mobilization, and in spite of all the mentioned powerful struggles, the 15M movement seemed to reach its limits. Lacking an institutional counterpart, it found itself in an institutional deadlock, and both its proposals and its demands were neither heard nor internalized by the constitutional system. Over the course of the "acampadas" (the Indignados' camps in the squares), many political figures from traditional parties called on the 15M movement to end the occupation of public space and stand for election instead. If they claimed to represent the people, the established political class reasoned, then the movement should "try to achieve your goals with votes and not with banners."[2]

Responses to the demands of the PAH provide another clear example of the deafness of the major parties in Congress and in office. The group's presence during the debate that took place in Congress in February 2012 on a Popular Legislative Initiative (PLI) on housing for which they had gathered more than 1.5 million signatures marked a historical turning point. Not only were PAH supporters not heard, they were literally expelled from Congress and looked down on.

The rejection of the PLI showed that popular mobilization alone would not be enough to break down the defensive wall protecting institutionalized political power. Moreover, there was a growing sense among activists on the street that it would become increasingly difficult to sustain the level of mobilization. This gave rise to feelings of political impotence as the movement found it hard to channel popular discontent.

However, different activists and movements kept thinking and maneuvering (with an intelligence and passion unseen since the struggles of the 1970s), and the metaphor of the "glass ceiling" became common currency. In the words of one of the organization's members, "the movements have moved from protest to action and have become ambitious   There's a glass ceiling for the movements and evidence that the laws are being changed by the institutions" (Blanchar & Mumbrú, 2014). What the statement implied was that while the movement had reached a political deadlock, a true impasse, the defensive wall protecting the establishment was actually weak. Soon enough, a number of members (many of them seasoned activists) identified a unique window of opportunity: they concluded that grassroots movements needed to seize institutions to end austerity and translate the growing sense of frustration into a source of strength.

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2   The following video shows major figures of the Popular Party calling on
     15M to stand for elections (Maldita Hemeroteca, 2015).

The main hegemonic social and political actors' inability to channel social discontent and unrest marked an opportunity.

This realization led to widespread discussions within the movements: eventually, "seizing the institutions" translated into creating broad citizen platforms and coalitions that would use the electoral system as a lever of change. The success of Podemos in the European elections of May 25, 2014 would accelerate this process, confirming the electoral hypothesis (or the "institutional assault" hypothesis) as the solution to the impasse of post-15M mobilizations.

THE PRAGMATIC TURN OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE MUNICIPALIST HYPOTHESIS

The strategy of standing for public office was by no means an obvious option for local activists in Spain, particularly in Barcelona, which has a strong anarchist and autonomous tradition. Moreover, one of the major slogans of the Indignados was "they don't represent us", a statement critical just as much of representative democracy itself as of those in office at the time. As I have already mentioned, what provoked the move was both the severity of the economic and political crises and the sense of a "glass ceiling" limiting the scope of what the movements were able to achieve from outside the institutions.

The question of which elections to stand for – at the municipal, autonomous community (Catalan), or the Spanish general election level – was initially an open one. Those advocating the municipal strategy argued that instead of viewing the nation-state as the focus of political action, as most parties did historically, political power should emanate from the local level, and later include the option of expanding to other levels or working in coordination/cooperation with other local actors. Local institutions were those with the greatest potential to act as vehicles for achieving many of the principal goals of the Indignados, in particular the deprofessionalization of politics, participatory democracy, transparency, and a battle against economic inequality. Local governments have a greater potential for true democratization compared to states, and therefore it is at the local level that many decisions should be made. Municipalism and local frameworks are especially suited to reverse the logic of representative democracy and create dynamics and spaces of direct and popular democracy as they can easily facilitate the construction of structures of self-organization, decision-making, and political intervention that act outside the exclusively institutional sphere and yet have the capacity to influence that sphere.

This approach was laid out in an influential publication titled "La Apuesta Municipalista" (The Municipal Wager), by various authors of the Madrid-based Observatorio Metropoli-

tano in 2014. According to the text, the hypothesis can be summed up as follows: "If we take the institutions that are closest to citizens, the municipalities, and we turn them into sites of direct decision-making, we can create a democracy worthy of the name" (Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014: p. 143).

Municipalism is a political strategy that can be adopted by political platforms of different kinds (from social movements to political parties). However, despite its electoral focus, the "radical or democratic municipal strategy" must exist in tension with the traditional institutional and party politics it seeks to infiltrate. As the authors of "La Apuesta Municipalista" explain, "the main requirement is that these candidatures are built as 'movements' rather than 'parties' in the classic sense of the word. With the aim of not reproducing the sins of the ruling political class, the 'municipal wager' is conceived as a project controlled 'from below', subject to collective accountability."(Observatorio Metropolitano, 2014)

A municipal initiative also had two further, pragmatic advantages over standing for the Catalan or Spanish elections. First, getting the message out to citizens without relying on mass media would be easier on a smaller scale, working through the well-articulated networks of movements and neighborhood associations across the city. Second, at the time the question of Catalan independence, an issue that divides the left, was at the top of the institutional agenda in Catalonia. Working at municipal level would allow those with different views on the national question to come together around common goals for Barcelona.[3] Finally, the decision was also linked to the fact that it would be easier to win municipal elections, and that if this was attempted it would more likely prove to be an inspiring experience. Some people link the strategy of municipalism with the PAH's discourse about "small victories" as the path to great change. Or, as it was said in the public squares during the 15M: "We are moving slowly because we are going far."

THE PROCESS OF CONFLUENCE IN BARCELONA EN COMÚ

The concept of confluence is vital to understand how movements or citizen platforms organize municipal candidatures, and how open and participatory approaches to electoral and institutional politics are built.

To launch the candidacies for the 2015 municipal elections, instead of searching for coalitions between existing political parties, the aim was to build an open platform that would encourage people with existing party affiliations, but also (and mainly) people not

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3   At the time the question of Catalan independence, a divisive issue for the left, was at the top of the institutional agenda in Catalonia. Working at municipal level would allow those with different views on the national question to come together to find common goals for Barcelona.

belonging to or identifying with a particular political party, to participate. The manifesto expressed the idea of confluence as follows: "We don't want a coalition or a mixing of political parties. We want to avoid the old logic of parties and build a new space that, while respecting the identity of everyone involved, is more than the sum of the parts that make it up."

This proposal was submitted to the citizens of Barcelona in June 2014, and had to win 30,000 supporters before September to be able to move forward. The group of activists promoting the proposal first secured the support of more than 30,000 neighbors, who embraced the initiative and its founding manifesto, which was later backed by other platforms and parties.

The result was a broad alliance of forces that would give rise to a candidature characterized by its mixed composition and a marked a-partisan accent that put the movement's aims before its name. The following parties joined: Podemos, ICV (the Catalan green party), EUIA (a traditional left-wing party), EQUO (a Spanish green party), and Procés Constituent (a leftist platform promoting a constitution-making process in Catalonia).[4] The participation of ICV was particularly significant; as a party represented at the municipal level, they qualified Barcelona en Comú for participation in the mayoral TV debates, which greatly increased the movement's public visibility.

Local social movements were another important actor that shaped Barcelona en Comú from early on. Although their relationship with the new organization was never formalized, the municipal movement was led by activists from social movements, with parties formally joining the process later. Many of those who started discussing and building the platform belonged to previously existing movements, such as the PAH, neighborhood associations, free culture activists, etc. There was also support from some critical sectors and relevant personalities in the academic field, and from individual citizens who were previously not affiliated with political parties or social movements.

To sum up, the idea of confluence has two important elements. First, the role played by leading social movement activists both during the process of confluence and as the project's public face, was one of the elements of electoral success. This enabled the initiative to win new activists and voters beyond those who were already identifying with its cast of political actors. In the 2015 elections, abstention dropped by 8 percent, a factor that was decisive for the victory of Barcelona en Comú. The electoral strategy of Barcelona en Comú was to attract voters who usually stayed away from the municipal

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4   The actors involved in the process of confluence were diverse. Two of them, the eco-socialist party Iniciativa per Catalunya (ICV), and the communist Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (EUiA), had a long history in Catalonia and three seats in the city council. The others, EQUO, an environmental party, Podemos, the left-wing party launched in Madrid, and Procés Constituent, a Catalan republican political movement, had never stood for the Barcelona municipal elections before.

elections: a figure that reached 47 percent across the city but in some districts was as high as 58 percent in the 2011 elections.

Second, the organization of the "confluence method" meant, at least in theory, that citizens were able to participate on equal terms with members of previously existing political parties. But the day-to-day realities have been quite different, and although the original idea was that members of political parties should join and participate in the citizen platform as individuals, and not as representatives of their own organizations, those "structures" still continue to exert a strong influence.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE POLITICAL LEFT

One important element of this political cycle has been the challenge to the old Spanish constitutional regime, and also its break with the traditional left worldview. The 15M represented a radical departure from the traditional left. Characterized by entirely non-partisan slogans and non-ideological politics, it intended to situate "the political" beyond the categories of left and right, and focus more on processes, concrete practices, and objectives.

The 15M movement saw the parties of the left as main actors in the political arena, and therefore as part of the problem. It identified the major Spanish trade unions as responsible for the current situation, rejecting their fragmentation and sectarianism, empty ideology, useless power struggles, as well as their involvement in a number of corruption scandals.

The 15M's initial slogans and calls had an inclusive and transversal character that lacked the traditional elements of the left. "It's not a question of left against right, it's the ones at the bottom against the ones on top", or Occupy's meme of "We are the 99%", referring to an almost universal and open majority. "Normal people" joined a movement that was thinking beyond traditional ideological identities. References to the "proletarian revolution" or "class struggle" were branded as ideological, leftist, antiquated, outdated politics. The focus was now on "democracy" – democracy as a counterpart to the political crisis of liberal representation. In this context, the official left was disoriented, marked clearly by its failure to deliver on the promise of social equality, which had an influence on the middle class and the politicization of younger generations condemned to precariousness.

There is a part of the 15M discourse that became an obsession for a great number of people: to be many, to convince the majority, to reach out to the "average citizen". This idea also produced the so-called "victory hypothesis" that winning the elections was possible. One of the features of this new politics, in addition to transparency or democratic regeneration, was its belief in the possibility of victory and change.

The rise of Podemos and different municipalist candidacies such as Barcelona en Comú

has disrupted Spain's traditional party system. Both kinds of projects share the vision of changing the discourse of the political left, but there are some important differences. While Podemos explicitly defends a populist approach to politics in which the simplification of discourse plays an instrumental electoral role, in the case of Barcelona the claim is that instead of defending grand structural discourses, the focus should be on ordinary people's actual demands. The aim in the latter case is to transform the structure of power at the local level so that ordinary citizens can become actively engaged in politics, while in the former case the strategy is to join people's views up with the leadership's interpretation.

A further difference between Barcelona en Comú's discourse and that of the traditional left (and of Podemos as well) is that it prefers cooperation and construction to confrontation, which is a genuinely masculine feature of politics. Instead of speaking about "us" vs. "them", it refers to the common good. Here, it is important to think about municipalism as a method and to reflect on the concept of confluence (see the sections below).

Another element that the movement has derived from the "confluence method" is that it does not see itself as the section of the left whose task is to provide the old left-wing parties with a new identity (I am referring here to ICV or EuiA, for example, or IU at the Spanish level), but as an open, inclusive, and democratic mechanism that can help build a different kind of political space. This is due to the perception that there is no need to organize around a more or less traditional party apparatus in order to "seize the institution".

A confluence between the old and the new left, between militants of different vital trajectories, has been possible. As the activist A. Recio points out, during such a process it helps to exclude references to the working class or the possibly communist character of a new model, which could give rise to conflicting sensibilities, and substitute these with new proposals that include ideas (or reformulated ideas) that have been part of this tradition: economic democracy, municipalization, predominance of the public or collective, egalitarianism, etc. (Recio, 2016). Having an asset like the charismatic Ada Colau is certainly another factor that supports this trend towards confluence.

THE *FEMINIZATION* OF POLITICS

The feminized nature of the municipal movement is particularly noteworthy. In Barcelona, the citizen platform chose Ada Colau, who a few months later became the first female mayor of Barcelona. Ada Colau was the charismatic head and spokesperson of the PAH, a young Barcelonian activist who has been a 'public face' of Spain's new social movements since the days of the 15M. The PAH's huge impact as a political organization and Ada Calau's growing popularity, supported by her strong media presence, made her the best candidate to lead the new coalition into the upcoming municipal elections, not least because she enjoys broad political backing. Colau represents all the ideas that

form the core of the new municipal candidatures: respond to the will and basic needs of the people, and not to the interests of private corporations; embrace the necessity of developing new forms of political representation; respond to the 15M claim of building democracy from below; not to leave politics in the hands of bureaucrats and "experts"; to build political confidence through actions, and not through words; etc.

Beyond this publicly visible level of leadership, women played a strong role in all branches of the movement, from neighborhood groups to policy-making. This was part of a deliberate strategy to feminize and de-patriarchalize politics; Barcelona en Comú has two coordinators for each of its organizational branches, 50 percent of which have to be female. The organization has no individual leadership roles; its elected executive body, for example, counts eight members, and its coordinating team consists of 40 members.

But as the feminist movement itself concedes, the introduction of gender quotas is not enough. According to the philosopher Montserrat Galceran, the feminization of politics comprises three elements. First, gender equality at the level of institutional representation and public participation; second, a commitment to public policies that challenge gender roles and seek to break down patriarchy; and third, a different way of doing politics, based on values and practices that put an emphasis on everyday life, relationships, the role of the community, and the common good. (Galcerán & Carmona, 2017). The last implies the development of feminist public policies in all areas, and the introduction of ideas such as diversity, co-responsibility, cooperation and non-competition, as well as care, all of which have a deep impact on classical conceptions of power.

Demonstration to claim equal rights for women, 2015

Barcelona en Comú has incorporated these three elements, and has made the feminization of politics one of its main slogans. Beginning with the presentation of a female candidate for mayor, followed by a large number of female candidates for the city council (and the district council) elections, the feminization of politics was visible from the very beginning. Women had a very strong presence in the electoral campaign in general, and they represent 60 percent of the city government.

Moreover, within the organization, representation in the different organs includes at least 50 percent of women at every level. Among other measures, many organs even limit the length of speeches in order to counter male dominance and incentivize the participation of women. In March 2017, the platform placed a call for external evaluators to assess the organization in terms of gender equality. From the point of view of implementing feminist policies, the city government has made strong compromises. For instance, it has produced a manual for urban planning that takes into account the gender dimension, a gender justice plan, a sexual diversity and gender plan; it has also implemented measures to counter gendered violence, and developed a strategy against the feminization of poverty. Each of these plans and measures includes specific actions that are currently being implemented.

Finally, from the point of view of changing actual practice, there are many dynamics and styles that should be mentioned, although changing and sustaining these feminist approaches is a constant struggle within the organization. Some interesting points include establishing non-confrontational discourse, the rejection of patriarchal styles, accepting mistakes and changes in opinion, establishing horizontal forms of organization, etc.

BUILDING DEMOCRACY STEP BY STEP

Barcelona en Comú emerged from the desire to form a new political actor beyond traditional political party lines, an actor with a radically new approach to institutional politics. The aim was to build a socio-political movement with a significant level of citizen participation (and not a traditional political party) that could function as a lever to access city government, a vehicle reflecting the majority's will, responsive to the needs of the people and the mobilizations. The platform wants to secure a majority – it was originally named "Guanyem Barcelona", which means "Let's win Barcelona" – to be able to reverse policies that fail to guarantee basic rights; it wants to do politics differently and democratize political representation. But so far, the point was not to enter institutions to be able to better represent the majority's rights (an improved copy of the structure of traditional parties), but to open up government to the citizens.

The idea was not to form a "more progressive" party that would reform the city on behalf of its citizens, but to "place power in the hands of the people" by transforming the way politics is done as such. From its beginnings, Barcelona en Comú fueled the

hopes and dreams of many people who organized in local assemblies, gave financial support, or simply embraced the emergence of a new formation.

Then, the first challenges appeared. The question was how to create a democratic mass organization and a new type of party structure. This was a question that earlier social movements in Spain, being much more familiar with small-scale projects, did not face, although there is an alternative left municipal tradition in the country with the CUP (the Popular Unity Candidacy, an anti-capitalist, pro-Catalan independence political party active in the Catalan Countries). And, to make matters even more complicated, the platform had only a few months to create a solidly structured organization formally capable of standing for election (in terms of its decision-making, election of representatives, accountability, and collective finance).[5]

The distrust of parties, or the idea of non-representation – one of 15M's legacies – explains in part both the need to avoid traditional party structures and the necessity to create something different that is driven strongly by social actors and citizens and rejects the old mode of doing politics. But how can a democratic structure and a new way of decision-making be organized to incorporate the idea of "governing by obeying", i.e. the idea of establishing an institutionalized hierarchy between the representatives and the base?

In practice, there have been real innovations regarding central elements of the organizational structure (decision-making processes, the census, the election of representatives, accountability, collective finance, etc.). Among other things, there is the organizational form based on assemblies, with committees, meetings, assemblies and plenaries. Despite its integration of some traditional parties, the organization operates on the basis of a very horizontal and open structure, managing to integrate into its multiple commissions people who previously have not been active in organizations. Barcelona en Comú's Internal Organization (Barcelona En Comú, 2014) comprises 15 neighborhood groups organized as self-managed assemblies open to anyone willing to participate (although newcomers' responsibilities and their capacity to make decisions are initially limited), several thematic groups linking activists and institutions (focused on issues including urbanism and housing, citizen participation, health, feminisms), as well as several technical commissions that manage essential day-to-day tasks (content, communications, logistics and financing, organization, and convergence with political forces). There is also an executive council that coordinates and oversees the entire process, as well as a plenary, the assembly open to anyone involved, where the most important issues are discussed and decided on, where mandates are generated, and where accountability is anchored (Mir Garcia, 2016).

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5   The International Commission of Barcelona en Comú has published a guide on how to build a political movement in the city titled "How to win back the city en comú" (BComú Global, 2015) which explains the origins, philosophy, and strategies of the new municipalist movement in Spain to urban activists around the world.

After the elections and winning city hall, this structure has partly been maintained, although important changes have been made to adapt the "machine" to the new scenario, and draw a clear division between "the party"[6] and its organizational spaces on the one hand, and those working in government on the other. For example, the neighborhood groups – some of which are more active than others – have now been given the mandate to be more of a kind of external counterpower and oversee the implementation of policies, remain sensitive to new demands, and broaden the coalition's voter base.

A Code of Political Ethics has also been drafted and approved to define the party's basic compromises concerning political representation, auditing and accountability, financing, transparency, professionalization, and corruption (Barcelona En Comú, 2015). This Ethics Code subjects its "representatives" to a series of checks and controls, and is an interesting experiment in electoral democracy. It also strives to promote the necessary legal instruments and mechanisms to make its ethical principles a mandatory norm for all members of the municipal administration.

The Ethics Code includes practical mechanisms to make funding and accountability transparent ("information should always be presented as usable open data"), measures to tackle corruption ("the obligation for elected representatives to make public their agendas and all their income sources, wealth, and capital gains") or "to close revolving doors" and "dissolve clientelistic networks" through non-collaboration with active businesses should the representative have exercised his work for at least five years after leaving the position. It also excludes bonuses, and calls on members not to commit tax fraud, or accept gifts. It also allows mandates to be revoked in order to limit the autonomy of the leadership, and "limit the time in office to two consecutive legislative periods". This code caps the average salary of political representatives at €2,200 (excess earnings go the social projects in the city), which is not low, but still less than what many senior executives earn.

This popular enthusiasm has also been drawn on to fund the electoral campaign and the party (headquarters, full-time members, etc). It is important to remember that Barcelona en Comú was launched without a euro. But the point was not only to seek citizen involvement in financing the movement. The move was also a response to an increasing number of popular calls to end systemic corruption and find a way to do things differently than the major parties with their established policies and practices, also in financial terms. In this context, in order to put an end to illegal "mafia" financing practices and the favorable treatment of political leaders by financial institutions, it was necessary to find new ways to fund political parties. It was thought that the major parties had mort-

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6   Although Barcelona en Comú is defined as a citizen platform, it has had to register as a party to be able to participate in the elections once dismissed the formula of grouping of voters (agrupación de electores)

gaged their proposals by relying only on the financial sector, which has been one of the main causes of the crisis. This meant that the movement only had one option to guarantee the candidature's political independence: it had to establish collective approaches to funding and explicitly accept support only from ethical banks and donations from individuals, avoiding large contributions and building on "small" but "numerous" donations from "ordinary" people.

In practice, this meant that funding for the election campaign came mainly from four sources: contributions (basically via the movement's website), crowdfunding (online micro-sponsorships or micro-lending), merchandise sold via an online store, and the assets of one of the left-wing parties that joined the coalition. As there are no traditional party members or people affiliated with the party, there are no fees needed to cover expenses. Instead, there are regular or occasional voluntary donations and loans. Also, there is a limit on the maximum amount that can be donated, and it is stricter than the regulations laid down by Spanish law. Crowdfunding – both an innovative and participative financing tool inspired by the values of the collaborative economy and a widespread financing practice among social movements – was used at a certain stage in the campaign to finance specific projects and initiatives (such as certain actions). Last but not least, it is important to stress the significance of the funding that came in via the public subsidies that one of the parties of the coalition (ICV – EUiA) receives on the basis of its past election results. This funding was crucial to cover election campaign expenses such as advertising, for example, which makes up the bulk of campaign spending.

On the other hand, efforts were and are still being made to promote access to economic information as an essential tool for democratic control and accountability. Transparent financial accounting (the party's total income and expenses, campaign budget, donors, invoices and vouchers can all be accessed online) is seen as a return to the supporters and to society in general, and as a way to tackle corruption and opaque party financing.

Another interesting element in this context is the way in which this transparency is achieved. In the wake of pro-transparency movements and the open data community in Spain, the process followed a number of crucial principles. These set out that the published data has to be relevant (offer complete accounting), visible (by making transparent the platform's expenses and revenues via its website) and conform to Open Data standards (in that they have to be understandable and accessible to all in an open data format). In this sense, the promotion of access to information, transparency, and open data allows citizens to follow, monitor, and comment on the party and the administration's actions, all of which encourages the participation of the "the vigilant people", who are a symbol of "counter-democracy" according to Pierre Rosanvallon (Rosanvallon, 2008).

The process through which the movement's ethical code was elaborated also reflected a new way of constructing a radical democratic organization. The different documents

that had to be formulated functioned as the open space for the debate between the movement's different political actors of the confluence. Later on, these documents or agreements were then made accessible and discussed with all interested citizens, in both digital and face-to-face encounters. A seminar titled "Governing by obeying – Ethical Code Days to build the confluence" was organized, where hundreds of people attended the training, discussion, and proposal sessions. From these sessions there emerged a much more specific and consensus-based text that was later enriched by online discussions in order to incorporate proposals that were broadly supported. The final document was put to the vote, and received a majority support.

The preparation of open primaries and the process of nominating candidates were also interesting aspects. There were intense and heated debates on establishing the criteria that would govern the creation of lists and the voting system, that is, the question of how votes should be counted. Even though there were other methods being considered, such as the Borda Count and Dowdall rules – which are more proportional election systems that favor plurality[7] – the chosen voting method was the "iron list", where sympathizers were able to vote for the head-of-list with his/her team, and for a representative from their district who would join the winning list. The complexities of the negotiations between parties during the process of "confluence" and the necessity to maintain internal balances account for the choice of this election method. Ultimately, it was Ada Colau who emerged as the final candidate.

It is also worth drawing attention to the collaborative and participatory development of the electoral program, which strove to integrate the central demands voiced by movements in recent decades. The program was open to proposals gathered at meetings in public squares across the city, by technical and policy committees, and through extensive online consultations.

To sum up: Open primaries, crowdfunding, strict ethical codes, collaborative programs, and the sectoral and territorial expansion of the organization have made the process of creating Barcelona en Comú an interesting experiment in electoral democracy. From the outset, it was built on the basis of ordinary people's engagement.

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7   Other methodologies have been developed to eliminate the drag effect that can produce very strong leaderships when the "iron lists" method is used, for example the Dowdall method, which is employed in Galicia or Madrid. It establishes a system of proportion according to which the vote received by a candidate is divided based on the place he occupies on the list. Thus, the top-most candidate receives one point, whereas if the fifth is elected, he or she will receive a fifth of that vote. Votes are weighed by order of preference in such a way that the vote that each candidate on the list receives reflects the proportion of votes obtained by the list in the primaries.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN CONTROL OF THE INSTITUTIONS

The electoral success of the citizen platforms is astonishing. Less than a year after their launch in 2014, their candidates, most of whom had no previous experience in electoral politics, took office in most of the country's main cities with an explicitly anti-austerity, feminist, environmentalist, and democratizing agenda. Barcelona en Comú stood for election, calling for a "democratic rebellion" and the "reappropriation of the institutions for the people", and sooner than expected, they found themselves in a position to take institutional action. But there have, of course, been setbacks. After two years in the institutions, which are the main policy changes that BeC has tried to introduce, and what are the main challenges it faces? Which challenges is the movement having to tackle on its path to becoming part of the institutions? How does the complex movement-institution relationship work in practice? [8]

THE HOUSING AND TOURIST BUBBLES

Prior to the elections, the city's various social movements all arrived at the same conclusion: Barcelona, they found, was exposed to the same typical problems as other so-called Global Cities: gentrification, and the financialization of housing, tourism, and other sectors – developments that have become visible across the centers of Manhattan, London, or Paris. They saw Barcelona as a global city that has over the last decades come to feel the impact of the real estate market, state entrepreneurialism, and urban policies that have favored capital accumulation over people (López & Rodríguez E; 2011).

A city that has experienced the impact of the housing and debt crisis on vulnerable groups is now facing a double and interrelated bubble, on housing (rent) and tourism. The traditional neoliberal urban model that functioned on the basis of the logic of the commodification of land and its financialization has been updated by a new element: a large part of the financial investment strategies have been transferred to the rental market, second-hand housing, and tourist accommodation, which has given rise to speculation and a housing bubble in the inner city.

Ada Colau recently outlined the tourism boom in an interview: "When we took office, we found economic activity out of control (…) For instance, tourist accommodation increased by over 18 percent in just five years. It was uncontrolled, extremely fast growth at the rate of a bubble, which is dangerous not only for the city but also for economic activity itself" (Al Jazeera, 2017).

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8   Recently, the same debate has arisen within Podemos, a debate on whether Podemos should focus on its institutional work or whether, on the contrary, it should revive its capacity to mobilize and strengthen its street-level presence.

In this sense, one of the main lines of action has been to implement important measures to address the problem of mass tourism and its impacts on the quality of life of the city's inhabitants, considering that in certain areas of the city the carrying capacity has been exceeded. This has been one of the central demands coming from the social movements that have been able to shape the political agenda and reframe tourism not as a "manna from heaven", but as a problem.[9] The first measures, controversially discussed, were a moratorium on the granting of licenses for tourist accommodations, hotels, hostels, and apartments throughout the city, and the suspension of new licenses to open public audience premises (bars, discotheques, restaurants) in the city's tourist districts.

Another central measure has been the adoption of a Special Tourist Accommodation Plan- PEUAT (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016). It establishes a zero-growth policy for tourist accommodation and a balanced distribution of such accommodation across the city. The City Council is also cracking down on illegal tourist apartments and platforms that advertise unlicensed tourist apartments by sanctioning the various platforms (Airbnb, Homeaway, etc.) that are considered to have contributed to the rise in rents and to processes of gentrification and touristification; the maximum penalty amounts to 600,000 euros. For a long time, it seemed that these measures had little effect given the huge profits of these companies, yet in June 2017 Airbnb announced it would stop listing illegal tourist apartments in Barcelona – an unprecedented move, although it still needs to be followed up with specific action.

The government's second focus has been on housing and confronting the housing shortage triggered by the financial crisis (evictions, broad segments of society are unable to pay for their rents, increasing gentrification, etc.). It is important to highlight that the city, like other European cities, is facing a growing housing crisis caused by a combination of factors, including demographics, the nature of mortgage markets, and the absence of investment opportunities in the "real economy", which have led to an explosion of rent prices until they hit record levels during the real estate bubble in 2007.[10] In the city, there seems to be a growing consensus (in the media, among tenants and non-tenants) that the increase in rents and the massive displacement are a problem of the highest order.

Given this situation – and considering the crucial role of movements such as the PAH in the field of housing rights – working groups have been established bringing together

9   According to the 2015 Municipal Services Survey (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2015) , developed by the town council, tourism is the fourth most serious problem in Barcelona, behind unemployment and working conditions, insecurity, and cleanliness

10   Idealist, a real estate development specialist, estimates the average rent per square meter in Barcelona reached 17.9 euros in 2016, a 16.5 percent increase in two years.

different collectives and social movements (not only the PAH) to draft public housing policies, and many proposals have been submitted, the majority of which are reflected in the Plan for the Right to Housing 2016–2025.

This plan increases municipal spending on housing by an average 77 percent each year. It also includes programs that provide strong and direct financial support for tenants, or make available unlet property for low-income families by subsidizing renovations or negotiating with financial institutions that own empty houses. Other measures include the mediation unit (Unidad Contra la Exclusión Residencial), a specialized service that tries to locate, prevent, and solve evictions through negotiations with owners, or by providing financial assistance or other solutions.[11] "What we are doing right now is ensuring that in every case that we are able to follow, no one ends up out on the street. There are solutions, temporary or permanent, better or worse, of more or less quality, but that is what we guarantee", says Javier Burón, the city's housing manager.

Also, there are plans to implement longer-term solutions, such as public housing schemes, or legislative changes. To confront the city's historic public housing shortage (1 percent compared with an average 15 percent across Europe), there is a plan to construct around 1,000–1,200 homes per year. And following the example of cities such as Paris or Berlin, the council is working on introducing a rent index that will define reasonable rent prices and curb speculation.

Yet the paradox is that after two years of left-wing policies pushed by a government that emerged from social movements, the housing crisis is possibly worse than ever. The current rental bubble is not about to burst, and pressure from tourism is continuing to inflate prices.

STREET VENDORS:
A COMPLEX INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

The question of informal economy, and specifically the management of irregular street vending (the "top manta") in the city's tourist districts is one of the most controversial aspects for the current municipal government. It has increased tensions between Barcelona en Comú and the city's social movements, and has also generated tensions across the bases of Barcelona en Comú.

The City Council has realized that increasing police presence will not solve the problem. Instead, it has now adopted a more "social" and integral approach. It argues that "top manta" should not be considered an issue of public security, but a social problem that calls for creative solutions – the social and professional integration of immigrants, for

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11   The Unit handled 1,092 cases. In 59 percent of these, it was able to stop or postpone foreclosure, while 38 percent were resolved through the emergency table, with social rentals or rent aids.

instance.[12] The City Council has therefore proposed extended "occupancy plans"[13] covering 12 months instead of six in order to help those without a residence permit and encourage street vendors in establishing cooperatives. The first cooperative, Diom-Coop, was formed in early March 2017, and will allow 15 formerly unlicensed street vendors to legalize their businesses, and offer them alternatives selling crafts and fair trade products legally at street markets and fairs. But the government also acknowledges that "obviously, DiomCoop won't solve a complex problem like unlicensed street vending" as mayor Colau said on a facebook post (Colau, 2017). It is a reality that has evolved into a huge political problem.

Street vendors, Barcelona

As I will explain later, the government has now reached its formal limits in attempting to solve this complex phenomenon. There is a combination of factors at work here. On the one hand, it is an issue defined to a large extent by Spanish immigration laws, from the Penal Code – which criminalizes street vending as a crime and not as an administrative failure[14] – to the Law on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners in Spain (Ley de extranjería) that makes people illegal. On the other hand, there are the

12   Opposing the police pressure put on street vendors, local activists have organized a support group called "Tras la Manta" (Behind the Blanket). Later, some vendors collectively founded the "Sindicato Popular de Manteros" (Popular Union of Street Vendors) in order to organize structured negotiations with the City Council and convey their proposals.

13   Occupancy plans are programs designed to promote the hiring of unemployed persons to carry out temporary activities of general and social interest.

14   Article 274.3 of the Criminal Code, which punishes what is known as "Top manta"", that is, the retail sale of products protected by industrial and intellectual property laws, with penalties from 6 months to 2 years in prison.

media and certain lobbies in the city (merchants, the local police) that are opposing the "contradictory and confused discourse of the town council" and the "increasing permissiveness", which they fear sends out a "wrong message" and creates a pull effect. Third, activists and human rights groups regret that the city of Barcelona en Comú has opted for a response that continues to criminalize street vendors. Last, there is the problem of electoral geometry: There is in power a minority government that has difficulties pursuing its policies because it needs to seek the consensus of other political forces. I will return to these issues later.

The debate on street vending reveals the intricate balances the local government has to maintain. A supposedly "small" problem has become a city-wide issue, and it makes evident the forms in which the city operates and the collision of institutional, electoral, media-based, and political powers. It also highlights a fundamental dilemma faced by a citizen platform that now constitutes the local government: the impossibility of "governing for all", and the need to side with the vulnerable, even if siding with them is bound to come with electoral or political costs.

THE MANDATE OF "LEADING BY OBEYING"

"To govern with the people" and "lead by obeying"[15] were and still are slogans that synthesize the challenge of the new policy brought to the institutions. By entering the institutions, the movement not only sought to "solve the most pressing problems", it aimed for an entirely different approach to governance – different in terms of greater citizen participation and control of public decision-making processes, and with a sensitivity for autonomous forms of urban self-government and the will to redistribute urban power, which traditionally lies in the hands of large corporations. Even though the candidacy of Barcelona en Comú was not seen as representing the full spectrum of movements (among other reasons, because the radical left was considering other political options), the program was nourished ideologically by demands and proposals voiced by the city's social movements, organizations, platforms, and the diverse struggles they were engaged in.

From the onset, the new government held meetings and events on a regular basis. Open assemblies were convened by the various district boards, which were regularly attended by hundreds of people. Until today, interest in participation has not dropped. Triggered by the City Council's approach to radical democracy, the existing participatory organs are being reformed, and their legal frameworks are being reviewed. New forms of participatory decision-making processes are being developed (especially citizens'

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15 These are the words of the Zapatista indigenous movement in Chiapas, México, which has condensed many of its principles into easily understandable phrases that convey big ideas about an alternative approach to leadership and building power.

initiatives and consultations), and new strategic plans for the city and each district were adopted in 2016 through a massive participatory process that included online participation (submitting proposals and voting for other people's proposals), and hundreds of offline meetings.

The dynamics of offline interaction and personal encounters has been combined with an intense and systematic use of technologies across different platforms. In line with the protest movement's original idea of promoting inclusion, openness, and participation, digital participation has also been one of the main features of the electoral cycle. Technology has provided the tools (for censuses, online voting systems, and digital discussion platforms) to facilitate internal democracy within the party, and open up discussions to citizens and movements.[16] The platform Decidim Barcelona is one such tool. It provides a new public digital infrastructure for democracy – one that embraces the ideals of open source and "technological sovereignty"[17] and enables citizens to co-create public policies. It was initially used to elaborate the city's Municipal Action Plan 2016–2019, which is the municipal government's roadmap for this term, but nowadays it is the platform used to follow all participatory processes in the city, such as the participatory budgetary pilot schemes launched by various districts.

At the level of the internal organizational model of "the party" open decision spaces have been established to collectively construct certain elements, especially when important decisions need to be taken, such as on whether the Socialist Party (the party that ruled the city in the past) should be allowed to join the government.[18] BeC, however, had no external structures in place to provide space for political discussions or collectivized government decisions, or tobuild links between its institutionalized inside

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16 Each technology has its own set of functions that BeC has made use of in specific ways. Twitter, for example, has been used to set up agendas, question the opinions held by political opponents, and position itself in public debates and in real time. It has also been used to build a network, a broad community, to spread opinions and generate multiple points of view. In fact, the BeC community has been very influential on Twitter. Many activists have participated very actively, and the communications working group has provided narratives, content, and design. During the election campaign, for instance, BeC trended 50 topics at state level, and 100 at the local level, while other parties only managed to trend two. Retweets were between 4:1 and 5:1 in relation to other parties. On Facebook, BeC has a popular profile counting more than 43,000 followers, and especially its leader, Ada Colau, has a significant impact, with twice as many followers as the two leaders of the two largest parties in Spain. But it is not only about numbers. Each technology and channel has a specificity, and each channel requires an individual strategy. Facebook, for example, has proven to be a very cost-efficient tool for campaigning: Spending only 3,000 euros on advertising, BeC used it to define for itself a "micro-target" during the election campaign to reach more than 380,000 people.

17 Technological sovereignty and open source were a part of the DNA of Barcelona's municipalist candidacy. All the infrastructure that they had to create, such as the web or the systems facilitating participation, voting, and collaborative discussion ran on the movement's own servers, allowing it to remain in control and ensure the privacy of the data of registered users in the "party".

18 The internal processes over the past months have showed worrying participation figures The bases of Barcelona en Comú have supported the pact, although there was considerable opposition. Of a total of 2,559 voters, 62.5 percent (1,625 votes) voted in favor of governing with the Socialists, while 32.82 percent (853 votes) voted against the alliance.

and an "aligned" outside formed by movements, collectives, and other organizations.

There has not been much progress in organizing and constructing a mobilized and organized citizenry. It has proven difficult to facilitate organizational efforts when they are not immediately linked to the party's established structures, especially in those spaces where BeC enjoys strong voter support, which are working-class areas. Its social implantation – and therefore its capacity for mobilization – depends not so much on local organizational structures or on Barcelona en Comú's presence, but on social movements that are aligned – movements with distinct positions on issues ranging from the exercise of power from the outside, by criticizing, pressing, and generating conflict and debate, to more pragmatic collaborations where movements "use" the institution as an "instrumental" element to multiply their transformative impact or co-implement or co-produce measures.

Institutionalization was accompanied by fears of a general process of demobilization and decapitalization. Activists were worried the movements might disintegrate because they might be perceived as concentrating their efforts on constructing an "electoral machine". One has to bear in mind that in practical terms BeC's entering into government required between 100 and 200 people – including some of its leaders – to make the transition from their movements into the institutions, which caused a certain degree of disorientation. However, the good news is that there has been an interesting relay process which has produced a new leadership, and we are now witnessing a new cycle of housing struggles in the city.[19]

The party has also made attempts to adopt tools that promote mobilization and social organizing, such as "La Comuna" (The Commune), a political self-formation school for party activists and all interested citizens. The school's aim is to train the organization's activists and sharpen their critical thinking, and provide a training ground and tools to strengthen organizational and political activism. It also wants to be a space in which all manner of issues are debated, a space inviting all citizens to "reflect and debate with everybody about the organization's commitments to the city model".

Another experiment has been the "filadora"(the spinner), a new fund that will support social projects in the city. It is financed by the excess salaries of the elected public officers of Barcelona en Comú. The 216,000-euro surplus accumulated due to the ethical code's salary cap have been earmarked for target-based funds to strengthen civil society associations without generating dependency or clientelism.

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19 There is a new wave of groups fighting to strengthen the right to housing. See for instance the map at https://noensfaranfora.com/qui-som/, which gives an overview of the vast number of collectives across the city: On the one hand, there are neighborhood-based groups defending the social fabric and opposing evictions, gentrification, and touristification. On the other, there is the newly formed Tenants Union, which did not previously exist in Barcelona or Spain; it believes that the organization of tenants and the production of a collective subject can start to change things.

These funds are made available to three different kinds of projects. The first are city projects that deal with legal issues, environmental sustainability, or the impact of tourism, and aim at building "a city for the common good". The second type are local projects that are sensitive to the needs and priorities of each neighborhood. Projects of the third type want to promote actions and campaigns to mobilize institutions and social movements that are in line with the political project of Barcelona en Comú. The whole process, from the selection of proposals to project implementation, is subject to the principles of transparency and accountability. There are clear selection criteria, an Evaluation Committee, and winner projects are determined via an online voting system to ensure the process is open to participation, independent, transparent, and not subject to clientelism.

THE BECOMING COMMON OF THE PUBLIC

One key element in the worldview of Barcelona en Comú is the idea of the commons, and of the common good (Ostrom, 1990; Midnightnotes Collective, 1990). It is a notion that was at the center of the political discourse during the election campaign, and it is actually reflected in the name of the platform: "en comú" means "in common". The idea of the commons challenges the long-standing distinction between the public and the private, and suggests that rights and responsibilities should be shared among institutions and citizens, and also among citizens. In this sense, the generation of innovative organizational patterns that try to motivate institutions to move beyond their established boundaries and create new ways of relating with the sphere of the commons – that is, the cooperative sector, or certain social organizations that manage collective resources – has produced a number of innovative approaches linked to the municipalist hypothesis (Castro & Martí-Costa, 2017).

One of them is a working group pushing for the legal recognition of self-governing areas and the communitarian management of some council properties or assets that the community sees as "common property" for collective and/or recreational use, such as social centers or community gardens. Building on the concept of "Citizen Heritage" (Castro & Fresnillo; 2016) , they are trying to promote the idea that certain public goods can eventually be assimilated into the category of common goods by recognizing the value of their social and communitarian use. The interesting element here is that legally, these are not typical assignment agreements, but contracts that recognize community use and the community's ability to govern itself by defining for itself a set of rules.

Another important element has been to appoint a Commissioner for Cooperative, Social, and Solidarity-Based Economy and Consumption, a new department of the local development agency, Barcelona Activa, which aims to encourage alternative economies, and promote and make visible the benefits of solidarity-based, social economy (Ajuntament de

Barcelona, 2017a). This commissioner has been working collaboratively within the sector and with its main actors, strengthening what the citizens have already created, in a city that already boasts 4,500 social economy initiatives that represent more than 53,000 people. They make up 8 percent of total employment and contribute 7 percent to the city's GDP.[20]

Building on this momentum, the city has developed a plan to provide a political response to the socio-economic initiatives working according to social and solidarity-based economic criteria. Public contracts now contain clauses that oblige companies to deliver "social benefits" by promoting the participation of cooperatives or social businesses in public procurement (Ajuntament de Barcelona (2016c). The objective is also to guarantee basic equality, environmental standards, and labor rights. The implementation of these legal and administrative tools has been a long-standing demand voiced by social businesses to push back strictly mercantilist criteria in externalization processes. The new social procurement guide is therefore a tool to limit the dominance of big business, considering that in the past lucrative municipal contracts were awarded mainly to a handful of large private companies.[21]

There have also been moves to reinforce the cooperative fabric in the medium or long term using public institutions as privileged partners. For example, there has been a bid for the creation of cooperatives in advanced sectors in need of greater investment, such as Coopolis, an economic promotion network that supports and consults social economy projects. It will provide a wide range of open services to the economic sector, including funding, consulting, business model development, or space (the same services offered by Barcelona Activa, the public organization responsible for implementing the City Council's economic development policies), and also will act as an incubator for social businesses.

Another opportunity to build institutions from below, arising from the intersection between the common and the public, is by (re-)municipalizing public services. After decades of privatization and outsourcing, the new municipal governments have now decided to re-municipalize a number of institutions, including three privately run kindergartens, as well as the city's care and support centers for women (PIADs) and for victims of gender-based violence (SARA).[22] There is also an important struggle over water management, a process driven by Aigua és vida, a platform of citizens, workers, and environmentalists that has the transformative potential to address issues of social and environmental justice.

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20   In 2016, financed by the Commissioner, Anna Fernàndez and Ivan Miró published a report on the state of Barcelona's social and solidarity-based economy (Fernàndez & Miró, 2016).

21   These companies have been FCC, Ferrovial, ACS, and Comsa (urban waste management); Agbar, a multinational corporation (water supply); Endesa (electrical distribution); Abertis (Wi-Fi infrastructure communication).

22   PIADs are local municipal services that provide information, care, and advice on all matters of interest to women, and also give access to various municipal resources. SARA is a municipal service that offers specific ambulatory care to victims of gender-based violence (women, children, and adolescents), and people from their immediate environment directly affected by such violence.

The responsibilities surrounding these public services such as water management has triggered an interesting debate about the commons at a very practical level. It opens up opportunities to transfer their management to a cooperative, or to make the different stages in the provision of these services more participatory (general orientation, planning, programming, management, supervision), or even to introduce forms of direct participation or self-government for citizens and workers.

LIMITS OF THE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Entering the institutions was driven by a shared diagnosis: Having exhausted all ways to influence legislation and facing an institutional deadlock, disposing of the existing political class and cleaning up politics was a prerequisite for any political transformation. The question is whether this "institutional blockage" has in part been overcome. As we have already seen, despite the different policies and proposals, new challenges have emerged. For example, in the fields of housing or tourism, which are both central drivers of the urban economy and of the process of dispossession, the constraints of municipal politics have become evident. Following the discussion of the relationship between movements and governance, this section aims to focus on the limitations of public institutions themselves to transform or revolutionize society.

CONCRETE LIMITS: INERTIAS, ECONOMIC POWERS, AND COMPETENCES

From early on, the process was driven by an idea shared by the majority of Barcelona en Comú activists. It concerned the question of what it means for a municipal movement to win. The answer to this question is that "winning" does not mean "winning elections". Institutions are only one part of what makes change possible, and in this sense, municipalism neither begins nor ends in public institutions. Occupying institutional power by itself does not really amount to "taking power", or guarantee a capacity to bring about change. What guarantees social rights is not the state, but the correlation of social forces. The power to act results from a combination of institutional and street-level power, from social movements that organize and provide social force and exercise pressure.

Take, for example, the right to housing, which is an "emergency problem" and one of the movement's central demands. It is possible to adopt reforms and measures – to increase the public housing stock, limit rents, transfer urban resources to housing cooperatives, halt evictions, fine banks that leave properties empty, or regulate the tourist accommodation market. But social force is needed to implement these measures in order to be able to demand additional resources to stop evictions. Supra-municipal alliances that move beyond the responsibilities and the scope of action of local institutions are also necessary. All this is a huge organizational challenge. And more importantly, it makes people aware of the material limits of formal government.

Firstly, there is institutional inertia and easements, or institutional "path dependency". This includes routines that are difficult to change, the rigidities of local bureaucracy, and the inherently conservative character of an institution clearly oriented toward managing the status quo. As Ada Colau explained recently in an interview, "the nature of the institution is not associated with the possibility of rupture". In this regard, we can highlight the "governing" logic, or the need to "govern for all", a pragmatic position referring to the challenges of "realpolitik" where any possibility of "taking political action at a real and useful level" is absorbed by institutional apparatuses.

Secondly, there is the role played by influential economic "shadow powers", and the lobbies and coalitions of local elites capable of imposing their agendas on the local government. As I have pointed out in the case of the established political parties, the media and economic groups act as a real counter-movement. Even the civil service itself occasionally pursues its own objectives. This influence of private elites and corporations on public decisions is reflected institutionally in administrative and juridical configurations, such as public-private partnerships, mixed capital companies or, for example, the Port Authority of the Port of Barcelona, which puts the majority of decisions concerning one of the city's key urban resources in private hands.

Thirdly, another important limitation stems from budget problems and the lack of key competencies in areas including tourism, housing, employment, energy, and public procurement. In Spain, local governments are the financially weakest level of administrative power, and recently the Spanish Government has adopted a number of re-centralization measures, further limiting local government powers.

Fourthly, an important factor to bear in mind when considering the limits faced by the new, but inexperienced government is that it lacks a broad majority in the City Council – Barcelona en Comú holds only 11 of the Council's 41 seats, with the previous governing party holding 10 – which forces it into political agreements with the opposition forces to adopt important measures such as municipal budgets. This situation has led Barcelona en Comú to reach an agreement with the Catalan Socialist Party, the party that ruled the city between 1979 and 2010. This government coalition has been strongly criticized by some of BeC's more militant supporters.[23]

Last but not least, there is the question of the social composition of the protagonist subject, or to put it another way: the limits of the political subject constructed across the cycle, a hegemonically middle-class cycle. In terms of their social composition,

23   Still, it is important to highlight that the decision to enter into a coalition with the
     PSC was supported by the bases through a consultation process.

Barcelona en Comú's 2015 election results show a strong transversality, with a concentration of votes in traditionally left-leaning neighborhoods (the old workers' peripheries), and also majorities in city-center neighborhoods or neighborhoods such as Sants that are home to a higher proportion of young precarious and left-behind voters. Still, it is obvious that this political cycle has been linked mainly to the white urban middle classes. The future, as some authors have described, passes through the alliance between a decaying middle class and proletarian social strata (Rodriguez, 2017).

All these factors and limitations underline how crucial it is for the active movements and platforms to forge alliances. Such coalitions and collaborations are in fact imperative for the municipalist movement.

Another important element is to keep pushing for long-needed institutional changes, while explaining and sharing what cannot be changed, that is, explaining to the people how institutions work, and where internal blockages originate from. Also, it is important to turn strategic discussions into public debates, and that if there are differences between government members, that these differences are discussed in public, and not resolved in closed-door negotiations.

BEYOND LOCAL COMPETENCES: DEALING WITH THE CENTRAL STATE

Over the last few years, the Spanish government has been enforcing a strong centralization strategy, which is gradually reducing the power of local governments. In 2013, the Spanish finance minister submitted a legal proposal to the Spanish Parliament to modify certain elements in the organization of local governments, and the Montoro Law (which owes its name to the minister) was adopted at the end of that year. Its main aim was to cut public expenses as a response to the requirements set down by the European Union, and it entered into force following a reform of the Spanish Constitution that reset the limit of the structural deficit of the state and the regional governments.

In practice, the Montoro Law gravely weakened municipalities by reducing their competences and cutting their budgets. Among other things, this piece of legislation requires them to have a balanced budget (unlike the state and regional governments), and it established enormous obstacles for hiring staff. The law has drastically reduced the capacity of municipalities to develop new policies, and in many cases to continue pursuing existing ones. In some cases, this has culminated in the privatization of certain public services and a budgetary focus on repaying debts that makes it impossible to address basic needs.

In order to understand the relationship between the government of Barcelona and the state, it is important to mention the shared and exclusive formal competences. The city can decide autonomously on issues of transportation, urban planning, public facili-

ties (sport centers, social housing, day-care centers, libraries, etc.), municipal taxes, management of public space, and it controls the local police. It also shares competences with other administrations in areas including health, education, and other social services.

This combination – having local governments in charge of an important portion of social policy throughout the state, but limiting their economic and legal power to take action – has maneuvered them into a difficult situation, although this varies with each city's actual budgetary restrictions. Fortunately, in the case of Barcelona, the budgetary restrictions have not caused serious headaches for the government of Barcelona en Comú, given the current public surplus. It has been able to reverse the privatization of certain services, such as home care services and a number of nurseries. It has also sent out an important signal by announcing the construction of new schools, nurseries, and social housing projects. The proportion of the city's budget for social projects increased by 5,5 percent in 2016 and another 4,7 percent in 2017.

But there are other issues where Spain's local governments lack competences, and/or where they have traditionally not been an actor. Here, creativity has allowed the government to make an impact despite its lack of formal power to change relevant legislation, and in some cases the leading role of the Barcelona government in promoting interventions has triggered a wave of active citizen support in other cities across the state. Two examples illustrate this momentum: they have to do with refugees, the immigrant internment centers, and evictions.

When the refugee crisis started, the Spanish government agreed after negotiations with the European Union that it would accept 1,500 refugees. In 2016, the city government announced that Barcelona alone would be willing to accept such a number of refugees. Then other cities began to make similar announcements. As a consequence, the Spanish government has been forced to increase the number of refugees it was willing to accept from 1,500 to 17,000. In February 2017, approximately 600 people arrived legally (many more have been arriving via existing illegal networks). Due to the political pressure exerted by local governments, the European Union sanctioned Spain for not respecting its compromise.

Regarding the detention centers for illegal immigrants, the city of Barcelona (like any city in Spain) is not the decision-making authority. For many years there has been a high level of mobilization against these centers. In July 2016, the city of Barcelona decided to close down the center due to problems with the license to function (which is a competence of the local government). Many other cities followed suit, which launched an open legal battle between cities and the central government. This battle is still being fought, but the prospects are much better than in the past.

POSSIBILITIES OF OVERCOMING THE INSTITUTIONAL BLOCKADE

The obstacles making it difficult for the "municipalist strategy" to challenge the established order, the established institutions, to shift the constellation of forces, and to deliver on its promises of change are strikingly obvious. All these factors and limitations have generated tensions between the movements and the "new politics", underlining how imperative it is to build alliances with social movements and develop international networks. As Barcelona en Comú is becoming more and more institutionalized as it settles into the institutions, it needs the movements to keep moving. The main challenge Barcelona en Comú is now facing is the question how to evolve into a political organization that keeps alive its capacity for social mobilization, and remains dynamic enough to join forces with other groups to exercise urban power. Another strategy has been to forge supramunicipal alliances with other cities in an attempt to overcome the limits of authority and undermine the influence of the state (and the other political levels).

FORGING ALLIANCES WITH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

From the beginning, the process was driven by an idea shared by the majority of Barcelona en Comú activists: the attempt to overcome the exclusionary disjunction between state-centric politics and a politics of autonomy, and to move beyond the simplistic binary logic of the street and the state, of "inside" and "outside". The choice is not between autonomy or institutional inclusion. The shared goal was to "seize the institutions".

This is the reason why municipalism has been framed as a movement that democratically transforms the realm of politics: It takes hold of the institutions, but at the same time moves beyond them. To overcome its limitations, municipalism has to include the "social movement" dimension that is capable of setting up counter-power mechanisms to subordinate some aspects of the institutional agenda and counteract local oligarchies. In this sense, the decentralization of power and the experience of neighborhood democracy can act as effective counter-powers that limit and control institutional power.[24]

As reality has proved, when there is an extensive process of mobilization, it is more feasible to extend the limits of the possible and rally support for otherwise marginal measures. There have been lots of examples proving how difficult it is especially for

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24 Currently, we are forced to chose between two distinct paths, reflected clearly in the new wave of housing movements emerging across the city. On the one hand, there is a view that sees party and movements as two separate spheres: the latter with a more autonomous/libertarian approach to the self-defense of rights, with no trust whatsoever in the capacity of the state to implement progressive change. On the other, with a municipalist perspective, there are those who envision a potential party-movement front, with movements capable of putting pressure on institutions and forging alliances with them in some cases – a true social force capable of surpassing state and supra-state power.

political and social minorities to build a new urban model when there are no organized social forces ready to demand and include measures that do not have City Council backing. Barcelona en Comú has for example been able to defend its budget, which prioritizes social measures such as building new nurseries, combating energy poverty, and making available resources for the city's poorest neighborhoods, thanks to the extensive and ongoing process of participation that it has encouraged.

In this sense, Barcelona en Comú, or the municipalist movement, is forging a policy of open alliances that are capable of accompanying and fighting the main conflicts that exist at the local level: these include opposing the budgetary stability law – the Montoro Law –, the housing emergency, the citizen debt audit,[25] and pushing for the re-munici-palization of privatized services such as water supply, or the creation of new municipal services such as electricity providers.

As is clear by now, achievements have been profound when pushed by alliances that successfully managed to mobilize citizens and drive exchanges between street-level and institutional power. This is true "dual power" at work, with each power playing its role: On the one hand, the dynamics and the popular participation of social move-ments capable of setting the political agenda, of mobilizing and organizing conflict, and of promoting certain solutions; on the other, the efficiency and the transformative capacity of political parties, the government, and its tools (law, policy, resources, etc.). The two most recent cases in the district of Ciutat Vella provide vivid illustrations of this interplay. The district's historic center has been affected by gentrification, tourism, and limited access to housing, but there are strong social movements and a Councilor (Gala Pin) who emerged from the neighborhood movement. Recently, thanks to the joint (and independent) cooperation between the social movement, the inhabitants of Ciutat Vella, and the City Hall, an abandoned building of more than 11,000 square meters owned by the city has been devoted to public rental habitats (160 houses) and small businesses in an attempt to address the housing emergency and gentrification. In a different case, legal irregularities have helped this "dual power" to prevent the opening of a luxury hotel, construction of which had already been planned and approved.

There have been also cases in which the role of social organizations has been applauded and encouraged. Take, for instance, Ada Colau's reply to a PAH letter, in which she criti-cizes that the Barcelona City Council has not done what is necessary to fully implement Law 24/20152: "first of all, thank you for your letter. For me, it shows that the PAH is still vigilant (…) doing what it has to do and what it was born for: demanding solutions to

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25   The Citizen Debt Audit Platform (PACD) is a citizen platform founded by 15M activists. It is part of the International Citizen Audit Network (ICAN). Through citizen motions it has been declared an illegitimate part of the public debt of some municipalities. They have created the Municipal Citizen Observatory tool to export the model to all municipalities in Spain.

the violation of a basic right such as the right to housing. For this there are no excuses, there are no justifications, it is not worth hiding behind the complexity of the problem. I have said it many times, and I repeat it now with more force than ever: without an organized and demanding citizenship, there will be no real change, nor a democracy worthy of that name. (…) You are our strength. We need you. We need your push, your demands (…)"(Colau,2015).

Another factor is the creation of hegemony as a crucial element that defines how profound and lasting the change is that the municipalist process can produce. The city has witnessed Barcelona en Comú's ability to construct a new cultural hegemony together with social movements outside the institutions, and give the city a new "awareness" regarding its values and priorities, and the ways in which democracy should work. This has clearly been felt throughout the tourism sector, which used to be seen as an apolitical, unambiguous good for the city; today it is a major issue in city policy, and with a growing consensus that it needs to be strictly regulated in the interest of local communities. According to a recent survey by the City Council, for the first time since 2009 unemployment has been relegated from the top of the city's list of problems and has been replaced by tourism, the effects of which have recently been prompting heated debates among Barcelona's inhabitants (Suñé, R, 2017).

AN INTERNATIONALIST RESPONSE

From the moment it was launched in June 2014, Barcelona en Comú had an explicitly internationalist understanding and awareness of how global factors impact local struggles, and vice versa. In its manifesto it stated that "a democratic rebellion in Barcelona would not just be a local phenomenon. It would connect with many related grassroots initiatives which aim to break away from the current political and financial system, starting from below. In Catalonia, in Spain as a whole, in Europe and beyond".

After the election, Barcelona en Comú began to develop two parallel but complementary international strategies; one was aimed at the institutional level, the other at building a political movement. Both focus on developing and harnessing international networks of local actors to face common challenges.

Both the institutional and extra-institutional strategies are based on the hypothesis that the local level is a privileged site of action, resistance, and transformation in the current global context. There is a particular emphasis on the failure of states and national governments to deal with key challenges (climate change, the migration crisis, international housing speculation, growing inequalities, corruption, etc.), and on the leadership role being taken on at the local level by organized citizens and local governments. Barcelona en Comú puts a particular emphasis on reclaiming popular sovereignties at the local rather than national level as a way to challenge the rise of discriminatory and xenophobic

discourses on sovereignty by the far right. Its thesis is that popular discontent with the economic and political status quo must be harnessed locally and networked globally to enable genuine transformation.

This international municipalism draws on David Harvey's ideas on the role of cities as the frontline in the battle against global capitalism (Harvey, 2012), as well as the theories of Murray Bookchin (Bookchin, 2006), and Abdullah Ocalan (Ocalan, 2015) on the potential of democratic confederalism to supercede the nation-state.

At the institutional level, Barcelona en Comú has focused on building pragmatic alliances based on concrete shared goals with other municipal governments. This has been necessary in part due to the lack of governments with well-aligned policy programs outside the Spanish state. However, on specific issues Barcelona en Comú has been able to define common causes with municipal governments of all political stripes. Barcelona took on a leading role in the network of local and regional governments against the TTIP and CETA trade agreements in Europe, declaring itself a "TTIP-free zone" (Bárcena Menéndez, 2015) and hosting an international conference of local governments and social movements in April 2016 to debate the proposed deals' local implications (Pina García, 2016).

Following the summer of 2015, during which thousands of migrants drowned in the Mediterranean sea, and countries in the south of Europe struggled to cope with those who did survive the perilous journey, the Barcelona en Comú government put great emphasis on the role of cities in the refugee crisis. In September 2015, Barcelona declared itself a "refugee city",[26] willing and able to take in refugees, and in March 2016 the city signed a cooperation agreement to support Lesbos and Lampedusa in refugee reception. Ada Colau has been a vocal advocate for the willingness of cities to take in refugees on the international stage, most notably at the conference of mayors organized at the Vatican in December 2016.

Barcelona en Comú also took a strong stance against the immigration policies of the Trump administration, approving an institutional declaration condemning the racist and xenophobic policies of the Trump administration and giving support to America's "Sanctuary Cities" which limit their cooperation with the Federal government in order to protect undocumented immigrants.

In parallel to this institutional activity, the extra-institutional party-movement of Barcelona en Comú has developed its own international strategy, focused on building a network of politically aligned municipalist movements in towns and cities across the world. The Barcelona en Comú International Committee leads this process. It divides municipal movements around the world into three categories: those in government,

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26   Barcelona city plan Ciutat Refugi or 'City of Refuge'. More on: http://ciutatrefugi.barcelona/en/

those standing for election or acting as local opposition parties, and those who work from outside the institutions, called contra-municipalist.

The International Committee's strategy is summed up in an article titled "Why the municipal movement must be internationalist", published in December 2016: "We must create a political space so that we can work with others to challenge, with greater strength and from more areas, the democratic deficit imposed by states and markets." (Shea, Bárcena, Ferrer & Roth (2016). The article recognizes that "Given that we face adversaries who cross borders, our response must also be transnational. We must be aware that our ability to restrain the excesses of gigantic multinationals like Airbnb in Barcelona will depend on the success of struggles for the right to housing in San Francisco, Amsterdam, New York and Berlin".

In terms of action, the International Committee has four main work areas: 1) Strengthening the idea of municipalism and its potential through communication and training (articles, translations, workshops); 2) mapping and growing the municipalist network (identifying new initiatives, contacting them, providing mutual support); 3) exchange of ideas and solutions on key municipal policy areas, for example re-municipalization, the right to housing, public space; and 4) providing mutual political support in key moments (e.g. endorsements in elections, declarations of support, joint campaigns).

Even though there have been meetings and efforts to consolidate an inter-municipal network to build a confederal and internationalist "networked municipalism", progress remains slow, and there are frustrations and limitations (technical, human, and financial) in moving forward.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this text has not been to evaluate in detail the process of "seizing the institutions" in Barcelona, but to discuss the limitations and opportunities of municipalism as a political hypothesis. After years of intense mobilizations, and after the movement's evolution into different autonomous organizations (PAH, neighborhood assemblies, Mareas, etc.), the so-called institutional assault was seen as one possible way to overcome the political impasse and seize the opportunity in order to translate the demands of the 15M into a movement aimed at conquering institutional power.

The desire to change the way politics is rather operated than lived found its first challenge when the need arose to create a mass democratic organization that would redefine the traditional political "party-form" and run for election. As mentioned above, this led to an interesting experiment in electoral democracy, and set the course for an ongoing learning process for the movement, which initially resisted the politics of representation, but then sought to transform it (through a democratic and assemblearian

structure, an ethical code, Filadora, etc.). In this sense, I believe Barcelona en Comú has become a model of how to build an open and participatory approach to electoral and institutional politics.

However, despite winning elections and its attempt to produce a new political subject or a party-movement organization, the institutional blockages persist. Currently, we are seeing the limits of municipal power vis-à-vis foreign investment funds, big corporations, big media corporations, or the constant blockage of higher-level administrations.

There have been several achievements or emblematic experiences during these two years in government in Barcelona in fields such as tourism, housing, basic urban services (nurseries, health, etc.), the feminization of politics, public procurement, cooperative economy, and a new, more community-oriented urban development agenda that includes "neighborhood plans" (Plan de barrios), all of which reflect an ambitious agenda focused on redistribution, ending social and urban segregation, and fighting inequalities.

However, despite having more than doubled social investments (in the social, education, and health sectors) in these two years, these inequalities have increased during a period of economic growth, and unemployment levels remain static. Although it was a programmatic priority and one of the strategic areas in the struggle against a historical trajectory marked by neoliberal government, it has proven difficult to reverse privatization processes and take back control over community resources such as water and electricity. There have been problems regarding the re-municipalization of water supply and sanitation services at the municipal level because they require the implementation of changes in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, a supra-regional level of government. There are also legal problems in terminating current contracts with big corporations for urban cleaning services and electricity. Moreover, the opposition has blocked the establishment of new urban services, such as the public funeral parlor, which aims to reduce the costs of dealing with death, as BeC is in a minority government.

The limitations have become most visible precisely in those policy areas that the new government had made its priority: housing and tourism. The city council has stopped issuing licenses in the neighborhoods most heavily affected by tourism, and it is currently trying to crack down on illegal unlicensed apartments, and attempting to reorganize tourist flows in order to preserve the city's inhabitants' right to the city. However, it has proved very difficult to close down irregular tourist accommodations, and this summer tourist numbers are expected to hit a new record high.

Tourists, Plaça de Sant Jaume, Barcelona

Barcelona's government is among those that have most clearly fought to ensure the right to housing. Municipal investment in this area is now four times higher than it used to be, evictions in 2016 decreased by 8 percent, and a public emergency unit has been created in order to actively stop evictions and prevent homelessness. However, this has not been enough to counter the housing crisis. Rents have increased exponentially (they are at an all-time high), as speculative investment has increasingly shifted to the rental market, and 83 percent of evictions are currently a result of this problem. Housing is the main challenge facing the city of Barcelona and other metropolitan councils. But housing is the exclusive domain of the Generalitat of Catalonia. Moreover, rent control policies are subject to state laws. And the Spanish state is not only ruled by a right-wing government, but also by the European Union's neoliberal directives. We need a multi-scalar revolution, and a federal municipalist movement is a welcome/necessary first step.

To be able to address the housing crisis, one of the key elements for cities is to have sizable public rental housing assets that transform them into market players that are in a position to influence prices, or at least to create the necessary housing stock to secure housing for those who will never be able to pay market prices. But generating a public supply of 100,000 rental homes at below-market prices requires more money and more time (cities such as Vienna have been building public housing for a century). Yet as the PAH has criticized, new public housing projects are making very little headway. Moreover, the purchase of empty housing, currently in the hands of banks, has been insufficient. It has quickly become apparent that the market will need to be regulated,

but that formulating respective regulations falls within the ambit of the state.[27] The issue has become even more complex due to a recent state law pushing for fiscal "rationalization" (the Montoro Law), which aims for a re-centralization of power and diminishes the investment capacities of municipalities.

A further problem is related to the local government's attempts to integrate different communities into the active process of guaranteeing rights (for example by setting up housing cooperatives) and encourage family networks to assume a wider role in sustaining the increasingly precarious lives of their members. While this seems a positive initiative, often the outcome is that these communitarian networks take on more burdens and responsibilities without actually seeing an increase in their executive or self-government capacities. This development towards "passive subsidiarity" has caught hold of many South European cities (see the social researcher Yuri Kazepov's extensive analysis for details), and it can be explained as follows: Despite lacking the proper capacity and competence, local governments in unconsolidated or decomposing welfare states are forced to pursue social policies by promoting solutions that, in part, overburden communities and social networks. They thus risk reproducing inequalities and failing to implement social policies (on housing, for instance) for the entire population.

This deadlock persists due to the lack of competence, power, and resources at the local government level, but also because of the relationship between the government and the movements, which tends to be more of a provider-client affiliation rather than an alliance that helps organize and scale up the conflict. It might therefore be productive to test a "party-movement form" where the government's relationship with organized communities is more sophisticated than in a clientelistic network or along a supply chain.

Luckily, this is not the only idea currently being developed. Among them is an initiative to create an alliance of "municipalities of change" ready and willing to practice disobedience against the state together with movements and territories (regarding public debt, for example) in order to construct networks and establish social legitimacy in opposition to centralized and capitalist legislation. This also involves an ongoing effort to test the "party-movement form" that recuperates the initial organizational hypothesis (networks that operate autonomously as commissions along thematic axes, independent observatories, etc.). This would reinvigorate instituent practices: mechanisms of participation and deliberation to ensure the party's democratic management, alliances with social and solidarity-based business movements, and re-municipalizations. These are all ways not to nationalize, but to democratize basic services, etc.

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27   The main goals of the newly created Tenants' Union (Sindicato de Inquilinos e Inquilinas) are precisely to push for new legislation to regulate and limit rents in the city, modify the LAU Spain's Tenancy Act to reverse the current bubble, and to develop the public housing stock. The majority of these issues, however, are not regulated by municipal legislation.

These efforts rest on strengthening the main idea of the municipalist hypothesis: primarily, that "seizing the institutions" was not so much a question of "taking over the state", but of re-establishing power and creating a new type of institutionality capable of developing into a new type of state that can expand the dynamics of civil self-organization. As a poster on one of the walls in the mayor's office reads: "let's never forget who we are, where we come from, and why we are here".

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ATHENS
AND THESSALONIKI:
BOTTOM-UP SOLIDARITY
ALTERNATIVES IN TIMES
# OF CRISIS

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THE CITY PLAZA IMMIGRANTS' HOUSING PROJECT IN ATHENS AND THE SOCIAL SOLIDARITY MEDICAL CENTER OF THESSALONIKI.

Greece was hit hard by the current economic crisis in 2010, the year that global dynamics translated into a crisis of sovereign debt which was followed by the implementation of austerity measures. The implementation of the austerity agenda in the country was followed by the propagation of the old Thatcherite slogan of "There Is No Alternative – TINA." In parallel, since then, with the onset of the increased migration of refugees to Europe (and in particular to countries of the Mediterranean such as Greece and Italy) in 2015, the country has also become the epicenter of this journey for those in search of safer/better lives. Additionally, the last seven years have seen numerous demonstrations, partial and general strikes, accompanied by the "Outraged" movement of the squares in 2011, all of which attest to the elevation of social conflict. The intensification of social protest was followed by the rise of grassroots social solidarity movements, one of the most important forms of resistance and people's self-organization to emerge. In this framework, solidarity from below has emerged as a counter-austerity narrative and praxis aiming to empower the disempowered in the face of growing xenophobia, charity, and philanthropic ideas and practices.
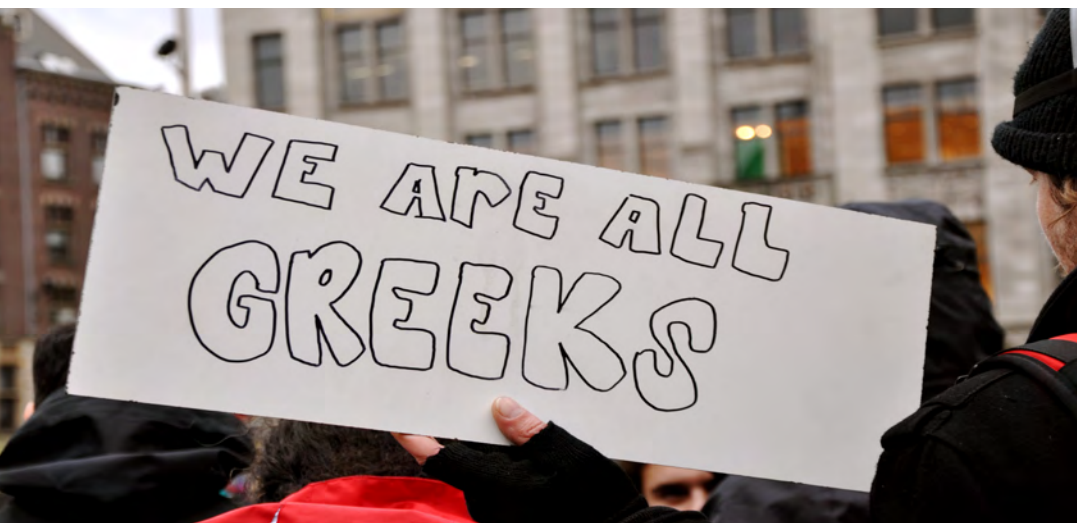
Self-organization and solidarity movements in Greece

We aim, in this framework, to shed light on a new reality of social, economic, and political processes that is emerging in Greece and has direct relations with and effects on other

such examples around the world. By recognizing the permanence and repetition of crisis in capitalism, we understand the current social, political, and economic conjuncture as a constant crisis, stretching over a long period of time, and as a new normality that has developed in relation to the intensification of social repression in Greece and abroad. Since 2011, in response to these dynamics, a common pattern of popular protest has arisen across the world, focused on radical democracy and the accountability of representation that calls for some explanation. Many of these protests have occurred in cities and while in each instance the source was specific, there seem to be some commonalities among these diverse irruptions of popular discontent. For instance, solidarity initiatives have emerged in several cities in the form of networks of localized struggles in and across urban spaces. The most important of these are located in Athens while many of them are spread across Thessaloniki, Volos, Heraklion, Patras, and other major cities (mainly around solidarity food provision, healthcare, education, and social/alternative economy). Moreover, agriculture solidarity networks (e.g. the no-middlemen-agriculture movement) have developed in rural areas, mainly in Thessaly (central Greece), Macedonia (northern), and Crete (southern). These forms of popular discontent are constructed as political communities focused not only on addressing the current concrete situated needs of the people in need but also on developing a transformative praxis.

Understanding the social initiatives as both political communities and transformative projects serves a twofold scope. On the one hand, by analyzing the political community, we try to shed light on processes of participation, democratization, and decision-making whereby internal power relations are collectively identified and tackled and there is an ongoing experimentation/knowledge-making on the basis of old and new forms of democracy. On the other hand, by researching the transformations generated we draw attention to the introduction of more equitable social relations, the transformation of discriminatory/racist inter-ethnic and intercultural relations, the transformation of the base of knowledge and experience that is considered suitable for pushing forward a social process, as well as the de-patriarchalization of gender relations.

This paper pays attention to two social solidarity initiatives from below, namely the City Plaza immigrants' housing project in Athens and the Social Solidarity Medical Center of Thessaloniki. Both movements emerged not only as practical responses to social needs within the ongoing societal crisis but also as new political communities under construction (in fact, they have fostered spaces for political struggle) that seek to form a counterexample of doing politics, to transform social relations, and make the changes generated durable. We therefore investigate the above-mentioned solidarity-from-below initiatives and consider their internal practices as an attempt to bring forward alternatives to capitalist/modern/western models for the material and symbolic reproduction of life.

We chose these cases because they a) complement each other; b) deal with basic aspects of the current Greek societal crisis: i.e. the lack of social policies for immigrants coming to Greece, housing and health issues; c) are significant examples of the struggles in the post-Occupy era of Greek social movements; and d) are vivid examples of the above-mentioned processes of urban re-commoning. To conduct our analysis we address questions regarding the initiatives' methodologies, "instituent practices," sources, internal and external relations, and (alternative) worldviews. This approach provides pathways for understanding how crisis and austerity shape the dynamics of social conflicts and mobilizations and offers insights into how social movement actors (the subaltern more broadly) both fight for and attempt to forge political, social, and economic alternatives.

Methodologically, our analysis draws on qualitative research, ethnographic fieldwork, and data collection on the two solidarity initiatives conducted between January and March 2017. Participant observation, field notes, archival research, and short (semi-constructed) personal interviews were the main data collection methods for both writers. Following both initiatives' assemblies, meetings, public events, and demonstrations allowed us to gain in-depth knowledge of what their actual resistance and struggle consist of.

With regard to a theoretical background, we agree with Tsavdaroglou et al. (2017) when they argue that we should pay thorough attention to "how the emergence of social struggle is related to a permanent crisis of capital" (p. 4). We therefore investigate the way in which the circulation of social conflict – that is the communication and intersection of class, cultural, gender, ecological, and political struggles (see again Tsavdaroglou et al., 2017) – interrupts the circulation of capital.

In addition, as recent scholarship has stressed (Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014; Arampatzi, 2016), in order to analyze the Greek crisis in depth and understand the new political and social situation, we should shift our focus from the macroeconomic causes of the crisis, and its variegated effects across various geographical contexts, to the ways and means by which grassroots movements disrupt, contest, and subvert crisis "from below." Thus, we should pay more attention to emergent forms of contestation of austerity politics as "actually existing resistances to context-specific neoliberalism(s)" (Huke et al., 2015: p. 18) and discuss their potential for producing "resistive agency" (Arampatzi, 2016).

These emergent patterns of struggle help us reconceptualize "place," the "articulation of local, inter-local and global dimensions," and "radical socio-spatial practices" in a radical manner. The terms "open localization" and "geographies of solidarity" are helpful in our analysis. The former describes new experiments in community building, radical politics, and democratization processes, and, more specifically, the "develop-

ment of an emergent bottom-up democratic politics in everyday life contexts, across neighbourhoods" (Arampatzi, 2016). The latter explains how political communities are constructed not merely on ideological terrain but through spatial practices, identities, the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and subaltern alternative politics. By creating a different kind of social relationship between people, by fostering participation and real democracy, and by practicing self-management in various areas of social and economic life, the solidarity movement has managed to become one of the most important, innovative, and hopeful outcomes of the peoples' mobilization and resistance.

However, we should leave behind politically simplistic accounts that seek to romanticize such solidarity movements and initiatives. We thus need to always bear in mind and stress their tensions, limitations, and complexities as well as their "localities." Social solidarity initiatives should be analyzed as phenomena in motion that are constantly transforming their practices, methodologies, and internal relations. Therefore, in order to unravel them, we should also examine the relationships between performativity and subject formation. These relationships are nonlinear and complex, depend on conscious and active political intervention, and must necessarily concern political objectives and outcomes – which lead us directly to issues of agency, strategy, and the struggle for social and political power (Calvario et al., 2016: p. 16).

The paper is structured as follows: The current section (introduction) provides initial thoughts as well as the theoretical background and the research methodology of the case studies. The second section gives an overview of the current economic, political, and social situation of Greece and the development of new forms of expression of popular discontent. The same section analyzes in somewhat more depth the social initiatives from below as part of the new forms of social protest and self-organization. Then we present the two case studies, namely the City Plaza immigrants' housing project in Athens and the Social Solidarity Medical Center of Thessaloniki. The sections that follow provide a discussion of the two case studies with regard to questions of internal relations, organization, political project(s), and transformative potential. The paper ends with some conclusions, remarks, and points for further thought.

FROM THE SYNTAGMA SQUARE UPRISING TO LOCALIZED STRUGGLES

As part of the global recession, Greece entered a severe economic, social, and political crisis in 2010. The crisis initially affected three highly correlated sectors: banks, real estate (including land and houses), and public debt. The crisis had a sobering effect, with skittish investors downgrading Greece's risk rating and withdrawing from further refinancing, causing the constant renewal of the (public debt) crisis. As a result, the IMF, EU, and ECB, known popularly as the Troika, intervened in order to refinance Greece's

public debt and to restructure the Greek economy according to the neoliberal ortho-doxy. Overall, as Bekridaki and Broumas (2016: p. 7) argue, three strategic aims were effectively pursued through the bailout programs: a) the removal of all barriers to the exploitation of labor by capital, b) the disintegration of the already feeble welfare struc-tures of the Greek state, and c) the privatization of public institutions and the enclosure of the country's commons.

In January 2015, five years after the first bailout program (May 2010), SYRIZA, a coali-tion of the radical left in Greece, took power and formed a coalition government with ANEL (a center-right party) on the basis of its promise to implement a sustainable plan for managing the debt crisis and overcoming austerity. SYRIZA was formed as a coali-tion of the radical left that adopted a strategy of being open to social movements as a model for both its survival and development. Social movement activists and organi-zations within SYRIZA have offered their experience in organizing in the field, and in providing new and innovative organizational and mobilization practices, which have been particularly useful in the times of Greece's social upheaval (Spourdalakis, 2013: p. 109). Since 2012, the party has gained national recognition and support by promising that "there is an alternative" to the austerity measures.

However, in the end, and despite the large "No" vote against the new bailout program in the referendum of July 2015, the government struck a new loan agreement that perpetuated previous austerity packages, including promoting privatization schemes for public land and infrastructures; wage cuts; divestment of the pension system; and the deepening of external, EU supervision of all state policies. So far, two major outcomes of this new phase have emerged for Greece. First, the SYRIZA party, however inad-vertently, has become part of the Greek political mainstream and has – more or less reluctantly – acknowledged the need to accept stringent reform requirements ("prior actions") in exchange for multi-year financial assistance. Second, it seems that the TINA ideology in Greece and Europe has been strengthened rather than defeated. 'SYRIZA's capitulation' to domestic and European elites undermines the many social movements that have emerged in the country during the crisis period to confront austerity policies. Furthermore, it undermines anti-capitalist ideologies and alternative, left-wing politics, since a left-wing party found itself the champion of policies it was elected to oppose (see also Velegrakis et al., 2015). As regards the social uprising(s), the events of summer 2015 have pushed Greece in a direction that threatens to demobilize the social move-ments and generate widespread resignation. As Karyotis argues (2016), "It is evident now in Greece that the neoliberal left and the neoliberal right are two variations of the same project — a project that requires a disciplined, atomized, obedient population, preoccupied with maximizing individual benefit, having relinquished any kind of collec-tive action to change society."

Greece should not be understood as an exceptional or unique case. Although the Greek crisis has been portrayed in the mass media across the world as "a national and moral problem rather than a global and systemic one" (Mylonas, 2014: p. 305), the roots of the crisis should (controversially) be searched for in the "recipes for recovery." The implementation of extra austerity measures, including extensive privatizations, an increase in sales taxes, wage cuts in the public and private sectors, and reductions to pensions has resulted over the last 7 years (2010-2017) in the constant renewal of the crisis. In addition, as many scholars have pointed out (see, among others, Krugman, 2009; Blyth, 2013; Peck et al., 2013; Hadjimichalis, 2014; Harvey, 2014), austerity is nothing more than a class politics aimed at re-engineering society and privately appropriating the commons. Therefore, under the conditions of crisis, austerity measures accentuate rather than repair socio-economic problems.

In parallel, since 2015, substantially higher numbers of refugees have arrived in Greece, making the country a major stopover on the journey of people seeking a better and safer life. Thousands of immigrants from Syria, Kurdistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other war zones have abandoned their homeland in search of a new home, where their life and freedom are not compromised. Unfortunately, the EU and Greek governments have been unable (and largely unwilling) to respond to the issue. Instead of providing safety and solidarity to war victims, they signed a (rather shameful) agreement with Turkey on March 18, 2016[1] with the aim of "managing refugee flows" and further securitizing the "forbidden" European borders. As a result, thousands of refugees are currently trapped in Greece, cramped inside detention centers and camps, away from the public eye.

The implementation of anti-popular austerity measures in the country together with the higher number of refugee arrivals has led to an increase in social discontent (demonstrated mainly during the summer of 2011 with the Outrageous social movement), political and social organizing, and the development of solidarity structures all over the country.

After the 2011 Greek Occupy movement subsided, many groups of local activists kick-started solidarity structures all over the country, organizing resistance around the concrete, situated needs of local communities. As a result, by the beginning of 2012 many solidarity groups had already been formed. In September 2012 there were about 80-200 self-organized solidarity structures in Greece, compared with almost 400 today. Solidarity structures are active in the areas of health, food, education and culture, housing and debt, legal support, the social and alternative economy, workers and immigrants' solidarity, and international solidarity. Their practices include restoring

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1   The agreement between Turkey and the EU was signed on March 20, 2016. Since then, refugees and immigrants have been trapped either in Turkey or on the Greek islands since no official process to accommodate them in different European countries has been developed.

electricity provision to poor households, the "no middlemen" distribution of agricultural products, solidarity healthcare clinics, solidarity tutoring programs, and other mutual aid schemes that respond to local needs. This period ignited the grassroots social solidarity movement in its current form. All of the initiatives are organized and formed as "open assemblies" with horizontal decision-making processes. Thanks to these characteristics, the solidarity movements have emerged from the ruins of the crisis as a powerful social experiment. They have outlined a political culture which creates the conditions for addressing social needs through the establishment of a material and social commons (Bekridaki & Broumas, 2016: p. 7).

At the same time, the social response to the refugee movement has been confronted with two of the basic aspects of the current Greek situation: first, the lack of financial resources and social security infrastructure due to the politics of austerity, and second, the strong social solidarity legacy built up during the crisis years. A new space and "era" of solidarity, namely solidarity with immigrants, has emerged. In times when both immigrants and locals have been (and are being) de-valued by implemented policies, solidarity initiatives for immigrants have become the alternative paradigm for a shared existence and struggle as well as open spaces of experimentation and the creation of alternatives.

Within this framework, solidarity initiatives play a vital role in the current period of social movements in Greece, for several reasons. First, they have emerged over the last years as a counter-austerity narrative and praxis aiming to empower the disempowered in face of growing xenophobia, but also charity and philanthropic ideas and practices. Second, they have forged mutual support and share survival strategies in the ongoing crisis of social reproduction. Third, they have fostered spaces for political struggle. Fourth, they have developed alternative modes of social and economic conduct. Fifth, they are an (indirect) outcome of the Occupy period as the activists' methods, practices, and discourses used during the Syntagma Square occupation (2011) have been localized to engender and strengthen all these initiatives (from 2011 until today). While several of the initiatives date back to the pre-crisis period, they only gained support, national recognition, and international attention after the mass protests of 2011. Sixth, although this is quite recent, the solidarity initiatives have achieved durability through the transformations they have generated. By persisting in everyday practices, networking all over Greece, and building strong alliances with other social movements (e.g. environmental movements, movements against house evictions etc.), they have created a "solid terrain of solidarity" that continues to grow despite the political and social difficulties they face.

Moreover, the bottom-up solidarity initiatives grounded in local neighborhoods as key sites of struggle have created a great network of localized struggles, social movements, and initiatives in and across urban space. Therefore, the social movements in the big

urban sites of Greece (mainly in Athens and Thessaloniki, but also in several other cities in the country's periphery) have emerged not only as practical responses to social needs within the ongoing societal crisis, but also as clear acts of urban re-commoning that establish alternatives. Starting from protests in favor of its particular interests, each movement soon transcended its locality in its search for broader alliances and networks with other movements. Each movement itself and the alliance-building with other movements has contributed to the "dynamic geographies of subaltern political activity and the generative character of political struggle" (Featherstone, 2013: p. 66). They have initiated processes of experimentation and learning from below, showing how relations can be organized differently in everyday life (and mainly in the urban context), beyond the limits of existing forms of social and political power. Subsequently, they have actively questioned the austerity-driven neoliberal patterns of development and their direct outcomes on environment, everyday life, and social relations.

On the central political scene, as far as the social solidarity initiatives are concerned, SYRIZA continues, albeit reluctantly, the project of previous – clearly neoliberal – governments that sought to criminalize solidarity. There is no doubt that the practices of grassroots solidarity movements are on a collision course with the government's current project as well as with the EU's current integration attempts. The working classes and immigrants are conceived only as a reserve army of labor in perpetual competition and with no rights. The strict international division of labor together with the huge project of capital accumulation leads to the constant exclusion of social needs from public – domestic and international – policies and discourse. Capital and goods continue to take priority over human bodies and their concrete, situated needs from the local to the global scale.

What is even more interesting is the discourse a so-called progressive government is following to justify its actions against social solidarity from below. Over the last two years SYRIZA has condemned sections of the social-solidarity movement as "initiatives that run contrary to the principles and values of the left" (Karyotis, 2016). On several occasions – e.g. in the summer of 2016, when police evicted two refugee squats in Thessaloniki – government officials spoke of "unjustified occupations that merely present a poor imitation of social struggle and an illusion of freedom." Thus, the government has shown little tolerance to those initiatives which are not in line with the interests of the state and its current policies. At the same time, ironically enough, the party and the government of SYRIZA continue to insist on "a mass popular movement" that will "monitor the government's actions in a peaceful democratic way." However, this so-called movement should be in line – or at least be willing to compromise – with the state. Actions that cannot be embodied by state institutions in one way or another are heavily attacked and suppressed, and criticized publicly for being "piecemeal efforts"

that offer help to a small number of people, in contrast to the organized efforts of the state. The government thus corroborates the idea that "social struggles that are not mediated by the state are either infantile or a threat to social peace — probably both" (Karyotis, 2016).

THE CITY PLAZA IN ATHENS: REFUGEE ACCOMMODATION AND A SOLIDARITY SPACE

The movement of hundreds of thousands of political and economic refugees not only from Syria, but also from Afghanistan, Iran, and elsewhere, to Europe, and especially to Greece, has been on the increase since 2015. It came at a rather "hopeless" or a "hope-draining" moment for the country, right after the signing of the third memorandum in July-August 2015. The government's shift to "Realpolitik" resulted in the continuation of neoliberal austerity, quick and severe de-regulation, and the withdrawal of the state from providing social security.

The City Plaza, a seven-story hotel at the core of Athens' historical center that has been abandoned since 2010, "reopened" on April 22, 2016, welcoming hundreds of immigrants – among them single-parent families, children, and people with disabilities. The initiative, undertaken by a coalition of antiracist, left-wing groups and individuals, aimed to re-use the empty building as a way of addressing the urgent need for refugee accommodation. People working in solidarity have thus managed to create in the "here and now" a model of dignified housing inside the city, thereby breaking with the reality of detention camps that the EU and the Greek government proposed as a solution for refugee accommodation. According to the first official document of the initiative, "City Plaza is a project of self-organization and solidarity, a centre of struggle against racism and exclusion, for the right to free movement, decent living conditions and equal rights" (Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, 2016d).

The City Plaza has become home to approximately 100 refugee families, as well as unaccompanied minors. Each family lives in a separate room and is responsible for cleaning and taking care of it. At the same time, activists together with refugees have been working collectively for the cleaning, repair, and organization of common spaces. In this way, locals and immigrants are trying to build new social relations and multicultural forms of coexistence, and to bring into being a living example of self-organization.

> Education and child-care: its aim is to organize lessons in the children's mother tongues, in Greek and in English, as well as creative activities. At the same time, it organizes the struggle for refugees' access to public education.

> Language classes: several groups of teachers provide Greek language lessons for children, English language lessons for adults and children, German language lessons for adults and children[2].

> Healthcare: the doctors and nurses which make up the healthcare team run the medical center at City Plaza on a daily basis and coordinate communication with public hospitals if needed.

> Kitchen: approximately 1,000 cooked meals are prepared in the kitchen daily, in addition to breakfast – by teams made up of refugees and people working in solidarity.

> Security: throughout the day and night there are teams in place for guarding the building against possible racist attacks[3].

> Cafe/Bar: the team runs the bar daily, offering coffee, tea, and soft drinks, thereby generating financial support for the initiative.

> Economics: a self-organized group takes care of the donations and spending (mainly for everyday goods). It provides regular reports on the financial sustainability of the initiative.

> Storage and cleaning: the main group is responsible for cleaning, repairing, and organizing the place.

> Communications: a group of "amateur journalists" who work on the dissemination activities of the initiative by organizing public events, discussions, small festivals as well as developing and providing press releases for the public media and the web.

City Plaza relies exclusively on political solidarity and on material support from the solidarity community in Greece and abroad. Financial and political support and, especially, people's service in the working groups are not only the initiative's sole protection against attempts to repress the initiative, but also a guarantee for its continued daily operation. For this reason, City Plaza has, since day one, attempted to serve as a wider center of struggle for the solidarity movement. It endeavors to show that there are alternatives to

2   There are several international activist-volunteers in the City Plaza initiative coming mainly from Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Denmark, and USA. German activist-volunteers have organized German language classes for the refugees.

3   The City Plaza Hotel is located in the Victoria / Agios Panteleimonas neighborhood in the center of Athens, a highly dilapidated area that was one of the areas where the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn operated during the period of 2011-2013.

the terrible government camps, accommodation that allows people to live in cities and in which living conditions are dignified and relationships are equal. These are spaces in which, despite their localization or material constraints, the wish to "live together" is turned into reality. The aim is to achieve a conception of everyday life that will empower people "from below," ultimately leading to the creation of a "space of freedom" (Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, 2017).

The focal point of the refugee crisis, the City Plaza also works against a spiteful scare campaign organized by the mass media against grassroots solidarity efforts, blaming them for everything that went wrong in the places where thousands of people were kept away from the public eye under inhuman conditions as a direct result of European immigration laws. In turn, these attacks were used to justify the exclusion of social movements from the "provisional" refugee camps set up by the state in former industrial areas on the periphery of Greek towns. Special controlled zones were created where only "accredited" aid workers were allowed, and efforts to interact and collaborate with the refugees were suppressed (Karyotis, 2016).

In addition, the important socio-spatial aspects of the City Plaza initiative have acquired considerable political significance. During recent years, there have been several regional and other attempts to segregate this Athenian neighborhood (Victoria Square, Acharnon Street, Agios Panteleimonas Square etc.). Notably, in the early spring of 2016[4] the Municipality of Athens, under the auspices of the city's Mayor, attempted to evict Victoria Square, placing barriers all around it, in order to prevent refugees and migrants from setting up a self-organized camp. Thanks to the activation of social groups and the solidarity movement, the attempt failed to lead to an eviction. That is to say, the square preserved its open character and remained a meeting point for the migrant communities living in Athens.

The Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees played a central part in this struggle, organizing daily food distributions and other initiatives, in order to thwart "the efforts to create "apartheid" areas, without the presence of refugees." Due to its location – only five minutes away from Victoria Square – as well as to the presence of members of the Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, the City Plaza was strongly bound up in the "life of the Square." Until this day, the square is considered a place of visibility for the migrant communities of Athens, and a protest against the gentrifying practices that reinforce the multiple forms of social exclusion[5]. Furthermore, the preservation of the square's open character is now aiding the development of a collective "safeguarding" of migrants from racist attacks.

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4   Police forces attempted the eviction of Victoria Square on March 7, 2016.

5   The City Plaza organized a public concert in Victoria Square on June 19, 2016 that eventually became a major cultural and social event for the neighborhood (Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, 2016a).

THE SOCIAL SOLIDARITY MEDICAL CENTER OF THESSALONIKI

Cuts in public expenditure have strongly affected the quality of, and access to, health services in Greece. According to the OECD, between 2009 and 2011 the 'per capita expenditure' for health was reduced by 11.1 percent, and, according to the ILO World Social Protection Report 2014/15, public spending on health dropped by 3.7 percent between 2007 and 2011. Public spending for medicine reimbursement dropped by 56 percent, from 5.1 billion euros in 2009 to 2.2 billion in 2012, a development that led to an increase of up to 70 percent in payment contributions for medicines for patients covered by social security (Solidarity4All, 2014).

Social Solidarity Medical Center, Thessaloniki

The savage cuts to, and wholesale restructuring of, the public health-care system have led to the closure of entire hospitals and clinics, the loss of medical staff, and nationwide medicine shortages. These changes have considerably restricted the capacity of public health providers to deliver services at a time when demand for them has risen, due to the worsening of the general population's financial standing. The most severe problem is the exclusion of more than 3.3 million people from the public health-care system. According to EOPPY (National Organization of Health Care Services) official data, more than 300,000 people have dropped off the social security register, due to their inability to keep up with payment contributions, or because they lost their jobs, closed their companies, or were unemployed for more

than a year, as mentioned above. This means that one third (33.2 percent) of the population of Greece is without social insurance, to which should also be added the hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants and refugees (Solidarity4All, 2014).

The Social Solidarity Medical Center of Thessaloniki (SSMC) was set up in December 2010 and it has operated since then as a social healthcare collective that provides primary medical and pharmaceutical treatment to all the uninsured residents of the city of Thessaloniki. It started with a group of activists and doctors willing to provide health support to immigrants[6] and locals excluded from the National Health Care System. The initiative then called for support from various health bodies and people willing to show their solidarity. A few weeks later, the SSMC started with the establishment of a pathology, pediatric, neurology, psychiatric, and dental department, as well as a pharmacy (from where every non-insured person could obtain his or her medical prescription).

After five months of efforts, Thessaloniki Labor Center offered the SSMC an entire floor of its premises in the city center. After one month of volunteer labor, the space was in a proper state to host the clinic. Since then, the SSMC has offered various medical services such as dental treatment, internal medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, neurology, dermatology, otorhinolaryngology, cardiology, and obstetrics.

Besides the health bodies that offer their services to the SSMC daily, many private doctors from various specialties have agreed to examine a number of patients every month in their consulting offices for free. Furthermore, private labs have offered to do some basic examinations and tests. With the assistance of the secretarial services in the SSMC, several patients have also been able to visit hospital doctors under special appointments without paying.

The SSMC is autonomous and self-managed. In regular meetings, the various health departments discuss and decide on everyday administrative issues. There is also an open SSMC general meeting which takes care of the overall operation and development of the initiative (e.g. financial sustainability and aids, external activities, alliances with other social movements, relations to the statutory bodies).

Between late 2011 and 2016, the SSMC received more than 5,000 visits from fellow Greek and immigrant citizens, while over a hundred health bodies offered their services. Furthermore, it became a model for other initiatives in several Greek cities. With only three clinics in September 2012 (besides the SSMC there was one in Athens and one in Rethimnon, Crete), today there are more than forty-five

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6   For more details regarding the health support to immigrants, see the next section.

functioning all over Greece. Activists, people working in solidarity and doctors have managed to create (…) a clinic that will offer on regular basis and without any financial burden to visitors, a primary healthcare. A primary healthcare accessed by everyone without any exceptions; we welcome non-insured and socially excluded Greeks and foreigners. Moreover, we aim to give birth to a social initiative that will try to put a lot of pressure to the state in order to ensure free and necessary case-by-case secondary and tertiary care, hospitalization and rehabilitation for everyone. (SSMC, 2015a)

The SSMC's scope, in the participants' own words, is "The promotion of health as a public social good: Fighting for society's right to free public healthcare while acknowledging that health is an issue that concerns each individual separately and society as a whole" (SSMC, 2015b).

In practice, they achieve their objectives not only by providing medication to the official public health-care system, but also by organizing protests and actions in collaboration with health-workers' unions, in hospitals, neighborhoods, and state institutions, demanding health care for all. At the same time, the SSMC has created meeting places that are open to wider communities, at the same time as striving to mobilize patients, and to create information campaigns about medication and health services as common goods. The clinic also hosts cultural and socio-political events and establishes synergies and solidarity bonds with other local/peripheral social movements[7].

In order to respond to their growing needs and increase their effectiveness, and also to stave off attacks from the state, private business interests, and fascists, the SSMC, together with other initiatives, have started forming more stable networks. This has been done either on the basis of common fields of action, such as the solidarity clinics coordination that operates nationally, or through connections with regional networks, and by activating localized networks (in the metropolitan area of Thessaloniki). The presence of such networks of solidarity, and their contribution to the creation of new social bonds when unemployment and deprivation are destroying the social fabric, have acted as an effective deterrent against racism and fascism, and have become fields of common action by and for all.

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7   For a more detailed description of all healthcare initiatives in Greece, see also Broumas & Bekridaki (2016).

BUILDING ALTERNATIVES WHILE RESISTING
TOGETHER WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL[8]

It seems that the societal experience in itself – organization and resistance – has served to create a "positive space," averting social panic and racism. Within this context, the building of solidarity networks has served the purpose of providing relief to thousands of refugees, and it was also the impetus for the remobilization of hundreds of frustrated social activists.

These rich societal, cultural, and political experiences strengthened the anti-racism and anti-austerity movement in Greece, providing new sources of learning potential, reinforcing national and international networks, and promoting originality and creativity. While the dominant institutional housing model builds refugee camps on the city's outskirts, dividing the EU's refugee-policy funds across several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the accommodation of refugees in Greece appears to be the impetus for a new social housing paradigm. The occupation of empty buildings in the center of Athens emerged as a practical response to the disastrous living conditions of thousands of homeless refugees in the cities and of those staying – for no one knows how long – in the huge state-run camps.

The City Plaza, as well as other refugee squats, exists under the constant threat of eviction. In the summer of 2016, the police, following government orders, evacuated two refugee squats in Thessaloniki. Then, in spring 2017, police evacuated one more in Athens city center, very close to the City Plaza. The evacuations were ordered by the government but were supported by both the owners of the premises and the local authorities (municipality of Thessaloniki and Athens).

City Plaza activists reacted to these evacuations by expressing their solidarity with the other initiatives and accommodating the refugees that had been put out on the streets. In their own words: We are certain that the planned attack against refugee housing squats is part of exactly this anti-refugee and anti-migration policy. It is neither an exception nor a diversion. It is completely logical that a government policy that presents refugees as being an enemy within is now adopting a policy of hostility to any example of dignified living and housing. This is, of course, a continuation of the broader anti-grass roots government policies. (Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, 2017)

That is to say, housing initiatives in Greece have brought a certain dimension of resistance to the process of building an alternative. Whilst they have taken action as an immediate response to an urgent social need, namely the accommodation of those in need, they have also mobilized alternative discourses and practices against xenophobia or against merely philanthropist accounts of the subaltern.

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8   Pink Floyd, Hey you. *The Wall* (1979).

Nonetheless, to this day – and probably for the foreseeable future – the risk of a possible eviction of the City Plaza and of other smaller squats has not been eliminated. Whilst the current government, like the previous ones, seems unwilling to tolerate the squats any further, the opposition continues to objectify the squatting movement, producing an ultra-conservative discourse regarding squatting practices, and putting some pressure on the government to evict all squats[9].

However, the initiatives very soon transcended the "locality" of the struggle in their endeavor to create an alternative space of living and struggling together. They have become a field of innovative activities and experimentation around these terms. The organization of everyday life challenges the dominant patterns of the material and symbolic reproduction of life in terms of the division of labor and care, decision-making processes, and participation.

As the City Plaza's first political administrative assembly stated in April 2016: By squatting an unused hotel, we wanted to be paradigmatic, we wanted to stress – as an example – how the social movements and society from below are able to improve the living conditions of the refugees and thus improve the livelihood of all (…). We wanted to create and develop spaces of freedom and of common struggles of locals and refugees. (Solidarity Initiative for Economic and Political Refugees, 2016b)

The City Plaza initiative tries not to promote dependence, but to encourage people to become independent and to look after themselves. It therefore provides the tools and platforms for people to think and act for themselves and understand their own personal and political situation and status. Drawing on the knowledge, specialized skills, interests, and professional experience of everyone – both refugees and locals – is the starting point. As Anastasia, a female activist, explains "We are not 'giving' solidarity, we are saying 'we are here as support but we cannot do everything for you.' This is really the challenge, to achieve a real sense of collaboration, independence, and freedom for everyone here."

As such, for activists in the movement, the initiative is not only a response to the social hardship of anti-immigrant politics. Rather, they are also part of the process of forging an alternative worldview on humanism, solidarity, and social relations more broadly.

Thus, again at the City Plaza's first political administrative assembly in April 2016, it was declared: We are convinced that the balance of power can be shifted in concrete practices rather than through general humanitarian appeals. In these practices the renewed version of the mantra of T.I.N.A. (There is no Alternative) of repressive migration poli-

9   More than two New Democracy MPs (a right-wing party) questioned the Government regarding City Plaza in the context of the parliamentary questioning procedure. The questions were directed to the Minister of Citizen Protection and they demanded the direct evacuation of the place.

cies can be disputed and space can be gained against the far-right; City Plaza made itself a place of solidarity and resistance in a neighbourhood that was claimed for years by the extreme right and the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn. (Solidarity Initiative for Political and Economic Refugees, 2016c)

They subsequently understand their movement as a political struggle. They aim to construct a politics of hope that gives the material and subjective conditions for subordinated social groups to "claim our [their] rights, to claim society, to claim democracy," as Kostas, one of the activists, argues.

This political struggle, according to the activists, is also a struggle against the state and the Greek state's (and the EU's) implementation of anti-immigrant policies. Therefore, they do not address their demands exclusively to the minister of refugee policies or different state institutions but to the Greek state and the EU as a whole. As Nikos, a pensioner and activist at the City Plaza, explains *these demands are not "humanitarian but political."* Thus, activists demand the annulment of the agreement between the EU and Turkey; the opening of borders and a safe passage for refugees; the full legalization of all refugees; no deportations to Turkey or elsewhere; the provision of decent housing and living conditions for all refugees within cities; the closure of all detention centers and camps; the provision of free access to healthcare services and education for immigrants.

City Plaza Squad, Athens

As we can see from their own words, the City Plaza's activists understand the political aspect of their struggle as well as their limitations.

We do not, of course, believe that the problem can be solved merely through squatting, as the provision of shelter is a fundamental obligation of the state and the local authorities; we do, however, believe that squats can act not only as a means for claiming rights but also as a factual exercising of rights precisely by those who are deprived of rights: the illegalized and excluded economic and political refugees.

City Plaza sees itself as part of the European and international solidarity movement which challenges the militarization of borders and the externalization of asylum policies and which claims the freedom of movement and the right to stay. (Solidarity Initiative for Political and Economic Refugees, 2016c, emphasis added)

SOLITAIRE OU SOLIDAIRE?[10]

With its optimistic take on the title of Albert Camus' biography, the film on the SSMC explores the collective experience of the building of an alternative in the sector of health and social care. The narrative goes back to the birth date of the Social Clinic as an initiative by health professionals who stood in solidarity with the hunger strike by fifty immigrant workers in Thessaloniki in December 2010. The fifty immigrants, together with more than 250 in Athens, declared a hunger strike against Greek migration policies, opening up the agenda of resistance against the austerity measures imposed by the Troika and the government to issues that had not previously been debated in public. Some of the workers were undocumented, but the majority had lost their working permits due to the unemployment caused by the crisis. All of them, however, had worked for years in construction, agriculture, and tourism services; some had families and the loss of their legal employment status made them subject to deportation (see Lafazani, 2012).

Within this context, the movement began as an initiative of resistance against the exclusion of immigrants from the national health-care system. Under the circumstances of the social crisis produced by the implementation of austerity measures, the Social Clinic developed as "a social care collective that provides primary medical and pharmaceutical treatment to all the uninsured residents without any distinctions and discriminations in terms of ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation" (SSMC, 2015a).

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10 "*Solitaire* ou *Solidaire*?", A film on the Social Clinic of Solidarity of Thessaloniki, 2016, by Eirini Karagkiozidou, Theofilos Kalaitzidis, Akis Kersanidis, Aimilia Kougioumtzoglou, Kiki Moustakidou, Stavroula Poulimeni, Chryssa Tzelepi. Trailer available at: https://vimeo.com/157417827.

The SSMC'S activists draw attention to the fact that, in the context of the restrictive fiscal policy and the commercialization of health, government expenditures in health-care have been dramatically reduced. As Giorgos, a doctor working in solidarity with the SSMC, argues,

The state is shirking its responsibility to cover even the most basic health needs for a large proportion of people in the country. For a poor, an unemployed, person, or someone with a serious and long-term illness, this means the completion of his/her social exclusion, the rapid deterioration of his/her health situation, his/her total misery, and eventually his/ early death.

From the very beginning, the SSMC appealed to all the social and cultural bodies and labor unions of Thessaloniki, as well as all the municipal councils and elected local authorities, asking for their moral and material support. Material support included a) donations, b) financial aid on a regular basis for the payment of the medical premises and its property expenses, c) medical equipment and pharmaceutical supplies and d) everyday solidarity work. The campaign was successful as the activists managed to generate steady financial support for the initiative mainly from donations and (unpaid) solidarity work. Furthermore, the activists were inspired and encouraged by relevant initiatives in other cities of Greece (e.g. the Metropolitan Clinic of Helliniko in Athens) and many of them had experiences of smaller-scale solidarity actions in the area of primary healthcare.

"We trust in our ability to bring change; united, we aim to put an end to these barbaric policies that leave people bereft of medical care," explains Fani, an activist participating in the SSMC during one of the initiative's numerous protests. The protest was held in front of the University General Hospital of Thessaloniki – AHEPA – and demanded that public hospitals (hence the state) address the social needs of thousands of citizens (both locals and immigrants) excluded from the welfare state due to austerity meas-ures. The activist's words accurately describe both the philosophical framework and the motivation of activists participating in the building of this alternative welfare structure.

Regarding its day-to-day work, the SSMC strives to create relations that lie outside of or oppose dominant social relations in the health sector. Some examples: Medical care at the SSMC is provided free of charge; all the participants carry out the planning, organiza-tion, and delivery of the "work" in a cooperative and equitable way; all of the members participate in decision-making and the development of the struggle.

One of the official documents of the initiative states: No one is more important than the other. We place special emphasis on the transformation of the relationship between doctor and patient, between those delivering and those receiving treatment and care. This is so because, in the particular context of our community, it would be impossible

not to reflect on our medical practice and on the role of the attending doctor. We are pursuing a holistic approach to health, 'patient' involvement and emancipation, as well as community medicine. (SSMC, 2015c)

The SSMC, together with other social clinics all over the country, have subscribed to the "Charter of Common Principles of the Solidarity Clinics," which was adopted at their nationwide meeting in November 2013 and led to a nationwide Cooperation of Solidarity Clinics and Pharmacies. In their charter the solidarity health centers clearly claim that they are open to everyone living in Greece; they do not aim to substitute the public health services that the state has decided to ditch, and they are fighting for the reversal of the people's exclusion from public health services and for an end to neoliberal health policies.

Since the solidarity clinics pushed for unhindered access to public health services for all from the very first moment of their existence, it was also expected that they would take action in this direction during the tenure of the new SYRIZA government in 2015. In this context, they have participated in the public debate by releasing their own statements, attended meetings with the Ministry, and have freely expressed their points of agreement whilst continuing to raise issues that have not been satisfactorily addressed by the state.

Nevertheless, the SSMC, as well as other related initiatives, do not wish to replace welfare-state structures. Although there are different political orientations amongst the activists at the SSMC, most of them define their struggle not as a replacement of the welfare state with a network of "solidarity from below," nor as a mere return to the "old" welfare state. As a result, solidarity health clinics continue to be structures of the wider social movements, which have their own distinct and autonomous political functions and aims vis-à-vis the state and the incumbent political parties.

"To my mind, this transformative potential in everyday practice forms the common background of all the current grassroots social initiatives," points out Irini, one of the activists at the SSMC. At the same time, activists are aware of the limitations of the solidarity initiatives in healthcare. They know that the day-to-day work is exhausting but never enough since the demands are constantly increasing. Furthermore, they are aware that today the progressive dialectics between the SYRIZA coalition government (the state in general) and the social movements in healthcare have dissolved. As Petros, one of the activists at the SSMC, argues, "SYRIZA's failure to include (even inadequately) all parts of society (such as us) within alternative methods for fulfilling people's needs made its defeat heavier and left social movements with new political questions."

For this reason, SSMC activists, together with other social movements in the health sector, try to exert "pressure on political society to ensure/secure universal, free of

charge, secondary and tertiary medical care, hospitalization and rehabilitation" (SSMC, 2015d), partaking in the social struggle for a universal, free, and public health system in Greece. Eleni, a young solidarity activist in the initiative, explains that.

We have neither the intention nor the illusion that there is the possibility of a solidarity initiative that subrogates the state and takes on all responsibilities of healthcare for the residents. We have full knowledge of the limits and possibilities of solidarity in the area of healthcare. Nevertheless, we have a firm belief that solidarity and the defense of rights, beyond declarative speech, require some specific actions. That is what we are doing here. We are taking action for the fulfillment of our concrete, situated needs regarding health services.

Many other solidarity structures, e.g. food structures, or the "no middlemen" initiatives, collect medicines that they hand in to their local solidarity clinic. This medicine collection campaign has become so successful that in quite a few cases the solidarity pharmacies have provided medicine to public hospitals facing shortages. In a similar manner, that is, through appeals to the public and the solidarity movement in Greece and abroad, the solidarity health centers have managed to find donated premises for their clinics and to equip and furnish them with cardiographs, dentist chairs, etc. Where this was not possible, the solidarity clinics pressured the local town council to provide them with the unused premises it owns and in a few cases, they have been forced to rent space.

While the movement tries to avoid the use of money, there is a need to cover utility bills and medical products for everyday use and for this reason solidarity funds have been created next door to the social clinics to collect financial donations and utilize them according to the clinics' needs. What should be underlined is the invaluable international financial and moral solidarity that many health solidarity structures receive from solidarity initiatives, trade unions, and individuals outside Greece. There is not one model for these solidarity clinics; each one is unique, and the same goes for all the solidarity structures. While all solidarity health centers are self-organized, some are linked with local doctors' associations and trade unions, some with local political groups, or cultural centers etc.

ASPECTS OF A SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIVE PRAXIS
DURABLE AND TRANSFORMATIVE EVERYDAY PRACTICES

The durability[11] of the initiatives is at the same time an outcome as well as a "continuous impetus." This applies to the important role undertaken by the City Plaza in the provision

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11   On April 22, 2017 the City Plaza turned one year old. The SSMC has been operating since the winter of 2011.

of decent housing to the refugees as an alternative to the state-run detention centers and camps. Moreover, the international solidarity network and the original and creative communication of the initiative has resulted in (and stemmed from) a widespread solidarity culture in Greek and European society. The creation of a heritage of experience through its everyday practices has also significantly strengthened the SSMC. Hence, both initiatives can be considered as prefigurative societal examples also in terms of the organization and multiple functions of their internal operations. For instance, both in the City Plaza and the SSMC the creation of a daily routine of short shifts widens the possibilities of participation in ways that are quantitative (numerous activists have the possibility of taking part in the internal life of the initiatives) and qualitative (all the activists, together with the immigrants, make decisions on the everyday practices and the future of the initiative). In this way, activists with care duties can also participate equally in the initiative. This model challenges a male-dominated structure by "introducing" other groups rather than the expected solidarity actors.

The perseverance and the uninterrupted continuity of both initiatives have resulted in an extensive international network and a major capital of knowledge. Regarding the latter, one can argue that the ongoing everyday experiences of the initiatives have led to a better understanding of the social and psychological impact of the societal crisis in Greece and of the experiences of war and migration. At the same time, the initiatives have also raised public awareness of these issues and their approach promotes active involvement so that people can work towards solutions and alternatives.

In this context, a volunteer working in the secretariat of the SSMC underlines the emotional aspects of her everyday experiences and the importance of empathy: "In the beginning I realized that the patients I visited, besides their need for medical care and medicines, were also in great need of a sympathetic ear."

Sokol, a 48-year-old activist-volunteer at the City Plaza adds: I feel good at the end of each day that I'm doing something that really helps. I know that I do things every day for the people who live here that make a difference. Feeling fulfilled is important to me. I can say to my children 'I'm doing something good with my time.' I think many people working at the City Plaza feel a sense of pride in the home that we have created. 25 years ago, I was a refugee. Ok, I was not a political refugee. However, I was alone when I arrived in Greece, I did not speak the language. I am able to feel what they feel in many ways.

Likewise, the editorial group behind the blog "A day in the life of City Plaza"[12] notes that: The most important idea behind the A Day in the Life at City Plaza project is that it presents portraits of human beings with pasts as well as futures. This project supports

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12   https://adayinthelifeatcityplaza.wordpress.com/2017/02/15/this-project-a-call-for-the-future/.

the idea that people forcibly displaced from their countries through war deserve more recognition than being labeled only as 'refugees' or 'victims.' It is our responsibility to humanize the people behind the numbers and the headlines.

In other words, the fulfillment of everyday tasks, including volunteer shift work, produces a culture of collaboration based on mutual understanding. Yet what are the challenges to organizing a way of common living?

A Greek female activist at the City Plaza, Olga, tries to answer the question: The basic thing is that we live in a world which is becoming more and more individualistic. It is a question of political emancipation. For many people, working and living in this collective way is out of their comfort zone, to begin with (…). There are many women in particular who arrive at City Plaza and have never been part of a meeting where all decisions are taken. They have never been involved in a space where they are able to participate equally in day-to-day life. After a few months, these women have gradually taken more and more initiative and responsibility. A self-organized space fights oppression and enables empowerment for all involved.

In addition, the organization of everyday life in both initiatives has been a major project. For example, the preparation of the three daily meals offered in the City Plaza Hotel is a huge operation. As Shero, one of the three chefs cooking in the City Plaza kitchen, describes, "(…) there are 400 people living at City Plaza and there are three meals daily, so that's 1200 a day. It is a big operation. We use what we have as best we can." The cooking of a decent meal for 400 people presupposes commitment and collective discipline. Shero notes, "In the kitchen everyone is equal. No matter where you're from or which language you speak, in the City Plaza kitchen you are equal; we do everything as one team."

Whilst the horizontal organization and the collective work that needs to be done every day both in the City Plaza and the SSMC challenges racial prejudice and also dominant gender stereotypes in the division of labor, they also serve the communization/commoning of a very important aspect of everyday life. Regarding the latter, "the use of what we have as best we can," in Shero's words, reflects a first-degree redistribution process which is in operation in the Plaza's kitchen, one which saves time and reduces raw material costs. Cooking in the Plaza is a communizing act, whilst it actually *creates something common*.

Another example of the transformative aspect of the everyday Plaza life experience comes from the clothing distribution process. The distribution of clothing happens three times a week in the Plaza. The majority of clothing donations comes from the distribu-

tion center in Elliniko Airport Refugee Camp[13], but there is also a smaller quantity of donations offered by locals. In parallel, a significant part of the clothing items are often sent to other squats or is redistributed in nearby Victoria Square to other immigrants and low-income people.

As Vittoria (Turrin) and Carles (Barcelona), volunteers responsible for the distribution of clothing, explain: It is not an easy job to work out how to distribute the clothes and organize the space. It is always a challenge. We have to make sure that the first people to arrive do not take all the best clothes. We have to keep things fair and accessible. After each distribution it feels like we have to reorganize the chaos.

Both initiatives' perseverance at building bridges and alliances between social actors has succeeded in institutionalizing a large network of antiracist, solidarity initiatives from below that has had a great social impact[14].

POTENTIAL FOR DE-PATRIARCHALIZATION OF GENDER

A crucial aspect of the reproduction of daily life in the City Plaza is related to the division of labor taking place there. The methodology of the division of labor implemented in the City Plaza challenges the patriarchal division of labor, challenging gender stereotypes and gender roles. Cooking, safeguarding, clothes distribution, cleaning, reception, mini-bar are all posts in which Plaza residents and volunteers are involved without any discrimination against gender, race, or age.

The same process of the de-patriarchalization of gender relations becomes visible in the field of every day work in the City Plaza. A practical rejection of a dominant division between the private and the public is key, while the organization of the reproduction of life – cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and the elderly – is de-individualized, making it a shared duty, the responsibility of the community. This shift from the dominant discourse and praxis on this issue has a strong transformative impact on the political culture shared by residents and locals as well as their subjectivities. The "ungendered" care labor has contributed to the feminization of the collective culture inside the initiative in radical terms.

Jamila, 56 years old, from Syria, and mother of three daughters, is residing in the City Plaza. She and her family have been in the squat since the beginning of the initiative. Jamila participates very actively in every sector of the place's internal life. With her

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13   At Elliniko Airport Refugee Camp (one of the official state refugee camps that is about to close in the next months), a volunteer clothing distribution center operates daily (https://firsthandblog.wordpress.com/2016/06/17/clothing-distribution-at-elliniko-airport-camp/).

14   To this day, no less than 1,500 have found a shelter and a home at the City Plaza. Furthermore, the initiative's social impact is reflected in the surprising response of people to the Plaza's solidarity calls as well as in the amount of food, clothing, and other material donations that are received daily.

experience as a professional cook, she has contributed to the re-organization of the kitchen. She regularly takes on a chef role. For the past two months she has been living separated from her husband Sami and she recently got a job in a hairdresser business two blocks away from the Plaza. Jamila is a role model for her three teenage daughters, who are taking language classes and preparing themselves for the continuation of their studies once their resident status becomes more permanent[15].

This ongoing radicalization of gender relations has become one of the most important aspects of the everyday City Plaza experience. Within this context, the community has treated a few domestic violence incidents that occurred during the squatting period as a collective problem. Thus, the struggle against gender violence is communized in the squat.

Additionally, both the City Plaza and the SSMC have produced new forms of symbolism in the field of gender and racial relationships. The SSMC, for instance, has organized campaigns criticizing the dominant political discourse on health issues. The case of twelve women alleged to be HIV-positive has become the epicenter of a huge campaign against racist and sexist ideas in the dominant discourse and in the state's practices. These women were detained by the Greek police, forcibly tested, charged with a felony, imprisoned, and publicly exposed in the run-up to the country's 2012 national elections. The SSMC immediately responded to this racist challenge by the former Minister of Health[16] by initiating a solidarity campaign built on the manifesto: "The twelve women's bodies are our bodies. Struggling against this discourse equals struggling against fascism."

A COUNTEREXAMPLE OF DOING POLITICS

For decades, the leftist movement in Greece has held a great share, and has accumulated a lot of experience, in social struggles, especially in the cities. In this sense, there has been an active involvement by left-wing and anarchist activists in all the struggles of the most recent period (since 2010), who have drawn on older urban militant traditions and expanded them into anti-capitalist issues. The materiality of the crisis' brutal effects that forced people onto the streets has been connected to wider political and class issues through the raising of crucial questions such as "what will we do afterwards?" This was particularly the case with the Syntagma Square occupation (2011), and it has persisted in localized solidarity movements since then. For instance, the focus of the antiracist leftist movement (even in the pre-crisis period) has always been directed

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15   Every time a family resolves its residence status, this makes space for another one in need of housing. Moreover, it is important to underline the fact that the majority of the families have a long-term uncertain residence status because of the asylum policies that are being implemented.

16   The Minister actually claimed that the twelve falsely detained women were "a threat to the Greek family while they could transfer diseases through unprotected sex."

against the state, the government, and international institutions through its campaigns for migrants' social and political rights, and its parallel activities such as Greek language schools or antiracist festivals. Within this context, the Greek social activist community could be described *as a politically engaged community orientated towards left-wing politics*.

At the same time, aspects of the political culture of the traditional left, such as centralism and bureaucracy, have been challenged through the emblematic and horizontal experiences of solidarity-in-the-making, open assemblies, or even squatting. Most of the collectives raised in the post-Occupy period try to function on the basis of a wide and complex social network partially independent of political organizations and to create assembly-based forms of organization where the assembly's decisions are binding and have the highest authority (see Petropoulou, 2013).

Therefore, we understand both the City Plaza initiative and the SSMC as urban political communities under construction. This processual logic shapes their overall functioning, their methodologies, their internal relations as well as those with "external actors" (such as state institutions or NGOs), and mainly their decision-making processes. For example, squatting is a very demanding process in terms of everyday life and there are a lot of practical tasks to be fulfilled regarding both everyday tasks (cooking, cleaning, safeguarding etc.) and the future of the initiative (assemblies, campaigns, relations with other movements, etc.). In this respect, political debate and discourse often seem to be drowning in a "sea" of urgent material needs such as alimentation, first-grade medical care, organization of everyday life, etc. Nevertheless, the horizontal structure of decision-making processes through the initiatives' political assemblies serves to transform the dominant political culture by tackling the reproduction of internal hierarchies. This of course does not mean that all male-dominated patterns are completely extinguished in the decision-making processes, but they are indeed challenged. Correspondingly, democratization is understood and practiced as an ongoing process without necessarily an end to it.

Moreover, our analysis of the two case studies shows that the movements raise broader structural questions and devise alternative forms of production and reproduction based upon their fulfillment of basic collective needs. Alternatives rooted in "solidarity" emerge from a praxis that seeks to counteract hegemonic constructions of common sense, promotes forms of self-organization, and turns subordinate subjects into political subjects. These forms of solidarity action merge different temporalities: from providing for immediate social needs, confronting the austerity state, to engaging in long-term processes of learning and experimentation. They combine, therefore, social and political struggles and are not about anti-politics. They are a counterexample of doing (radical anti-systemic) politics.

This process of constituting a collective subjectivity does not necessarily induce the construction of new, unified social bodies. It is rather about new forms of coordination and interaction based on common practices and which are in conflict with dominant policies (Stavrides, 2011: p. 180). Thus, the connections that are formed are not based on solidarity alone, but on concrete common interests, demands, and practices of protest. The notion of "community" plays a decisive role in the shaping of these movements. This kind of activism, strongly mediated by spatial practices, urban issues, and forms of local organization, has led to the development of specific unifying processes. Mutual objectives coalesce among residents from different areas of the city, due to the tangible nature of local issues. Addressing these common issues draws diverse actors into common interactions, reinforcing feelings of trust and emotional solidarity. In turn, this also reduces the feelings of individual insecurity about risks and helps people to overcome the problems of collective action. Further, solidarity counters facets of escalating social competition, and allows the actors to engage in increasingly risky conflicts. Such practice and experimentation thus becomes a way for people to acquire the basic skills of political agency and knowledge.

Solidarity Space City Plaza, Athens

These radical counterexamples also involve elements of a radical internationalism. For instance, solidarity networks formed as a practical response to the needs of the immigrants' movement in Greece and Europe have shed light on the necessity of reinforcing the international antiracist and migrant social movement. "We live together, we fight together, Solidarity will win" is the motto shared by both the SSMC and the City Plaza initiative. Both projects have also managed to hold larger political events, demonstrations, and struggles.

For instance, on March 18, 2017, the one-year anniversary of the signing of the EU-Turkey agreement, the City Plaza initiative called for a European Day of Action. The call resulted in the activation of a large-scale antiracist and solidarity network in Greece and in Europe. In Athens, the initiative led to the biggest antiracist protest of the past few years. The picture in cities across the country was similar. Over nineteen demonstrations took place in the rest of Greece, on islands and cities, where refugees and locals created big events that resonated throughout the country. The Panhellenic Network of Antiracist and Migrant Organizations contributed significantly to making this a nationwide event.

At the same time, from Rome to London, from Berlin to the Basque Country, the streets were filled with people protesting against racism and austerity.

As Sandro Mezzadra (2017) notes in an article written within the framework of the preparation of the International Day of Action against the EU-Turkey agreement (18M): For a moment, soon after the Troika had smashed the resistance of the Greek left government, a different Europe – constituted around the principles of freedom, equality, and solidarity – seemed again possible due to the push of people fleeing from wars in which Europe itself is deeply involved.

This is an important internationalist precedent, not only because it highlighted the fact that the issue of refugees is not cut off from other forms of oppression and discipline affecting the people, but also because it can serve as a reference point for a systematic networking of European social movements. Furthermore, it also constitutes an attempt to form a social response to the upsurge of anti-refugee violence, anti-refugee parties, and anti-refugee state politics.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By analyzing two grassroots social solidarity initiatives in an urban context, this paper sheds light on a new reality of social, economic, and political processes that is emerging in Greece in the post-Occupy (2011) period. The Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza in Athens and the Social Solidarity Medical Center of Thessaloniki are two vivid examples of social solidarity from below which initially emerged as practical responses to social needs within the ongoing societal crisis. At the same time, they have come to stand as counterexamples of doing politics; they foster spaces for political struggles and put forward alternatives while trying to make sure the (small but signifi-cant) transformations they generate will last.

To this end, we could describe them in terms of what Kaika and Karaliotas (2014) call a "bottom-up democratic politics" in an urban space. This is not only practiced as horizontal participation, or an open decision-making process, but also as a practical

transformation of everyday life. Indeed, these forms of solidarity practice mix different temporalities: from providing for immediate social needs, confronting the austerity state, to engaging in long-term processes of learning and experimentation, and cultural change in urban life. Furthermore, they have also promoted changes in the subjectivities of both migrants and of locals working in solidarity, encouraging a shift towards more autonomy, more collective solution-seeking, solidarity as a political praxis, and so on.

At the same time, they are also political communities under construction through their combining of social and political struggles. They engage with a variety of methodologies, discourses, and tactics, and in a broader sense try to empower the disempowered whilst at the same time aspiring to political change. They question power relations and practice democratization as an open-end process. They thereby seek to forge mutual support and encourage survival in an ongoing crisis of social reproduction while fostering spaces for political struggle.

One of the most interesting elements of the social solidarity initiatives is their unification and their transformation into something more than an aggregation of resistances: these mobilizations have become highly active in the sense of a new mode of politicization. Amid the rapid disintegration of mainstream political forces, broad sectors of society have started looking for new forms of practicing politics, separate from, and in certain cases in opposition to, traditional ones. These forms express the need for a re-appropriation of politics, a need for collective participation, for the creation of public spaces, spaces of social experimentation, of alternative counter-institutions. What is at stake here is the need for a "move to the political," but not in mainstream or institutional terms; this is a move to politics outside its traditional forms of exercise, with street politics a strong component. This new impulse opens up the possibility to reflect anew upon the political beyond, and in contrast with, the focus of conventional politics which operates solely in the legal and institutional sphere. This also presupposes a completely new type of political practice, rather than a mere intervention into existing mechanisms.

These movements have re-established the feeling amongst ordinary people that they can participate in political life and contribute to the exercise of politics in a new way. This is a rather revolutionary conception of politics, in which movements function as social laboratories, creating space for social interaction, experimentation with new ideas, and innovative social norms and codes, through real contact with creative and collective processes. Such experiments and structures of popular self-action and inventiveness, of collective will, of labor organization, of antifascist-antiracist action, and solidarity have the potential to function as constituent forms, and thus as structures of emancipation and consciousness transformation, for the people. Such active or hidden networks of support may have powerful transforming effects on working people and their social relations, empowering them, posing ultimate issues to do with 'control', and providing

a different route to politicization. In other words, and speaking in Gramscian terms, this effort of unification through organizational forms in the sense of 'unity in diversity' requires creating the roots, here and now, of another way of organizing society, not as islets of communism inside capitalism accepting the partial as such, but as the material base of change, the articulation of the partial with the whole, the material challenge of capitalist hegemony (Gaitanou, 2016: p. 239).

To conclude, the continuation of neoliberal austerity in Greece together with the continuing rise of the "immigrant issue" has resulted (and will continue to result) in a myriad of tensions in all aspects of social, economic, and political life; solidarity initiatives, working movements, antiracist and antifascist movements, as well as socio-environmental movements continue to emerge. In the huge gap of social (re)production in Greece imposed by the neoliberal restructuring policies of the Troika, we have encountered, throughout the country, communities of struggle that have been formed. These communities tend to employ instituent practices and permanent characteristics as a way of collectively addressing unmet social needs / desires and ensuring their collective survival. We hope that these tensions will continue to lead to social and political movements (in Greece and abroad) that challenge the system that produces the tensions in the first place.

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BEYOND DEVELOPMENT: STOPPING THE MACHINES OF SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION AND BUILDING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS

Global Working Group Beyond Development

→ ACCOUNTABILITY

→ LOCALISATION

→ INTERNAL DEMOCRACY

Is there an INTERNAL
INCAPABILITY TO
ADDRESS EMERGING ISSUES
FROM THE WAY & HOW
THE LEFT WAS CREATED?

OPEN QUESTIONS
FOR THE WAY
FORWARD!

IDEOLOGICAL
→ POLITICAL
EDUCATION
(inc. consciousness)

HOW TO ADVANCE
TOWARS MULTIDIMEN-
SIONALITY IN PRACTICE
?

→ LEARN FROM HISTORY
→ LEARN FROM OTHER
COUNTRIES (with proper
account of the context)

**COLLECTIVE
REFLECTIONS**

The present text is the result of a collective process of analysis, dialogue, and editing based on the second meeting of the *Global Working Group Beyond Development* in the Ecuadorian capital, Quito, and in Nabón County, in Azuay province, in May 2017. It represents an effort to understand the historical moment our world is living through, its patterns of domination and the tendencies, prospects, and challenges of a multi-dimensional transformation. Our discussions have been deeply rooted in our localized experiences of struggle and alternatives, with their particular histories, strategies, advances, and challenges, and in the search for global connections, translations, and lessons between our experiences.

The perspective of the *Global Working Group Beyond Development* has been the idea of multidimensional social transformation, as was explained in the introduction. At the very least, the following five key processes of social change are required to strengthen justice, dignity, democracy, and the sustainability of life:

> decolonization;

> anti-capitalism;

> anti-racism/anti-casteism;

> the dismantling of patriarchy;

> the transformation of predatory relations with Nature.

The group shares the conviction that radical change, understood as a transformation originating from the roots of our society, economy, and politics, is imperative if we wish to put a halt to the current socio-ecological destruction wreaked by our civilization in crisis. Several members of the group felt that spirituality and *cosmovision*[1] are another crucial dimension of this transformation.

Our discussions were informed by five case studies on the construction of multidimensional alternatives in different regions of the world: the self-determination of the local people of the village of Mendha Lekha in Maharashtra, India; the community resistance against oil extractivism and the closely associated post-colonial State in the Niger Delta in Nigeria; the current building of an alternative municipalism in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain; the building of radical solidarity alternatives in the midst of the economic crisis in Greece; and the process of the Bolivarian revolution, later labeled as "21st-Century Socialism," in Venezuela.

A crucial element that facilitated and enriched dialogue was the Global Group's visit to the municipality of Nabón, which was aimed at learning from the experience of building

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1 *Cosmovision* is our way of seeing and being in the world according to indigenous communities and movements. The word is used to distinguish the indigenous consciousness of the unity of all living things from the modern consciousness that separates Nature and humanity, the present from the past and future, and the individual from the community.

Sumak Kawsay or *Buen Vivir²*. In Nabón, this indigenous vision has been translated into a mode of local governance practiced by communities and associations with the support of the local government, which was led over four successive terms of government by two female mayors from the indigenous and intercultural *Pachakutik* political movement, as is described in chapter on Nabón.

Our discussions were inspired by multiple global debates and emancipatory perspectives, such as those associated with eco-feminism, the commons, socio-ecological change, post-extractivism, the rights of Nature, degrowth, transition thinking, and others. Often these debates have been more effective in showing the directions in which social change needs to go than in providing the practical strategies of transformation. At the same time, our group integrates researchers, popular educators, and activists who are deeply engaged with processes related to social movements and the politics of transformation, and who deal with the very concrete and practical challenges of social change on a daily basis.

Our main objective for the Ecuador meeting was the analysis of practices of multidimensional social transformation. We engaged with questions such as: What strategies do we need? How can we do this in ways that do not remain marginal, but spread throughout our societies? How do we engage with the dilemma of the urgency of stopping accelerated socio-ecological destruction versus the usual slowness of deep cultural change? How can we ensure that transformation takes place in democratic, emancipatory ways? And what kind of institutions can sustain these processes of change?

Of course, these are big questions considering not only the complexity of contemporary societies, but also the particular character of our group, made up of people from so many different realities with their own particularities.

We focused on four central questions which will constitute the central parts of this article:

> How to democratize democracy or deepen democracy in the context of the growing diversion of democratic tools for the benefit of political and economic elites, taking into account the authoritarian practices of previous emancipatory projects?

> How does multidimensional transformation deal with the State? Or what is the role of the State in such a transformation?

> How to make use of or handle the legacy of the left? What does the left need to rethink or transform in order to deepen its emancipatory potential?

> What kind of internationalist relations and solidarities are necessary for multidimensional transformation?

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2 *Sumak Kawsay* (in Kichwa) and *Buen Vivir* (in Spanish) translate as "living well" in English. The concept refers to the possibility of living with dignity, prosperity, and in harmony with all living creatures, and is very much based on indigenous spirituality and communitarian practices.

As was analyzed in the introductory chapter, these questions relate to a particular historical moment of profound changes and new challenges. The paradox of our historical moment might be that radical transformation is imperative and urgent, but at the same time it seems further away than in recent decades. All of this means that we need to be mindful of two different temporalities: short-term actions and campaigns that can put an end to socio-ecological destruction now, and long-term strategies for building deep-rooted alternatives that secure our collective future. We could also state this in terms of the defensive struggles that protect rights, institutions, bodies, and territories from predatory capitalism, and the offensive struggles that create other worlds through new subjectivities, social relations, modes of production, and institutions.

One of the lessons of the past historical cycle might be that politics as we know it is not enough for the kind of transformation the world needs; neither has armed struggle proved to be a path in the right direction. At the same time, most of the political legacies, instruments, and analytical horizons of the global left also seem to be insufficient for meeting the contemporary challenges as they were developed to overcome a very different form of capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. We have seen that the variety of organizational structures and practices that were used and developed in social movements throughout the long 20th century have reached their limits over the last two decades. New ways of doing politics are being invented in processes of mobilization around the world, but they lack a shared political horizon and instruments for structural articulation.

Global Working Group Beyond Development during the fieldtrip in Nabón, May 2017

Prior to outlining the four sections on each of these issues we have dedicated a section to the particularities and embeddedness of our dialogues, and the ways in which we relate to colonial legacies and presents, as well as to patriarchy and gender.

After the four thematic sections, we will try to wrap up our ideas on the implications of these debates for political strategy.

We decided to produce a collective text that reflects our conversation, and we have therefore not included references and citations for the concrete members of our group in the text, nor have we included extensive bibliographical references. We are very aware there are many differences between our perspectives and thoughts, based on theoretical or political differences, but also regarding the concrete necessities of the contexts in which we are living. However, we feel the dialogue between our differences enriched all of us, and produced new knowledge and thinking that goes beyond our individual positions. In a sense, this final document is like a tapestry in which the words and feelings of all of us have been woven together. We have tried to represent our discrepancies faithfully and to open up debates and new questions because we feel that the right questions are as important as relative certainties.

PRELIMINARY NOTES ON DIALOGUE, HISTORY, AND COLONIAL DIFFERENCE

In our meeting, we intended to develop a global discussion rooted in personal and collective localized histories and experiences. "The global" and "the local" are not separate spheres, but co-constitutive dimensions of realities around the world. Our world is shaped by place-based actors and actions in complex, interdependent, and continuous ways. For example, the resistance of farmer, *campesino*[3], or indigenous communities to mega-mining operations can affect global stock markets and bilateral governmental negotiations. At the same time, the rise of global prices of minerals due to the boom in the Chinese construction sector can intensify the strategies of mining companies for advancing their projects even when they are resisted.

The global is present in the local, and vice-versa. Therefore, in our meeting we tried to understand ongoing global processes as they are constituted in concrete places around the world. We also tried to understand why similar political phenomena, like the emergence of new social movements highly critical of traditional politics and representative democracy, are taking place in very different societies at the same time.

Therefore the challenges of our discussions have been simultaneously methodological, political, and theoretical.

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3   *Campesino* is the Spanish word for peasant but goes beyond this meaning as it includes a differentiated social and cultural identity within Latin American contexts.

Throughout this experiment we have agreed to think and learn together as a group through the exchange of our experiences, but also through the recognition of our differences, in order to:

> deepen and clarify debates on and analysis of concepts, criteria, political contexts in relation to alternatives beyond the development imperative;

> contribute to the strengthening of strategies of emancipatory resistance and the building of alternatives;

> strengthen articulations, weave alliances, and build support networks for future actions;

> and to create ways of communicating our ideas and debates within and beyond academia.

Our analyses are informed by our personal histories, locations, and trajectories of struggle, transformation, experiences of pain, joy, victories, and injustices. They are also embedded in very different historical experiences, societies, and movements, which produce diverse semantics and significations. Although we all share a commitment to similar political perspectives, and participate in the politics of social movements, we are not the same in terms of sociocultural background, education, political identities, spiritual beliefs, and geographical belongings. Therefore, in our discussions we often included information on our class, territorial, and political belongings and becoming in order to make our situated knowledges explicit.

This rootedness allowed us to talk from positions of complexity and diversity while on the other hand it also implied challenges in terms of dialogue. We saw that words like crisis, identity, the State, the left, solidarity, Nature, alternatives and many others turned out to mean very different things in different contexts. Although, of course, we never intended to find universal or univocal meanings, we did strive towards the identification of connections and equivalences that allow shared political horizons and comprehension of how global patterns of domination are at the same time connected and specific in each geo-historical context. Our discussion therefore required us to both find translations between languages, as well as to recognize the differences between ourselves. Several of these will be analyzed further in the text, but at least three are so fundamental that they should be made explicit right from the start.

Firstly, our group could easily be seen as homogeneous in ideological or political terms, but this would be a false conclusion. Although leftist political identities and histories are present in many of us, we recognized that not all of us come from the left, nor do all of us see the left as our principal political identity. Some identify with Gandhian political thought or orientations, and others in our group would see themselves primarily in social

movement terms, as part of indigenous, feminist, or environmentalist struggles. This diagnostic allowed us to understand that our group identity and debates go beyond the left, engaging with a far broader horizon of emancipatory traditions. Much more on this will be discussed in the section on the left.

Secondly, as we come from different parts of the world, we come from very different historical conversations and embeddedness. We need to take history into account, in a complex and differentiated way. In particular, our debates and situated knowledges are deeply influenced by colonial difference[4] that has deeply marked our bodies, territories, societies, States, and knowledges, affecting in very different ways colonized and colonizing peoples and societies.

Although this is still rarely acknowledged in the Global North, colonial difference has shaped power structures within and between our societies, as well as economic processes and networks, with deep implications that still exist today. Africa was distributed to the colonial powers in a way that guaranteed their access to lakes and rivers, determining reality until today. African, Asian, and South American cities and rural areas were connected to allow the exportation of agricultural products, minerals, and precious metals to Europe in specific ways still present today. And European societies integrated colonized peoples within their societies as second-class citizens for their own economic gain, naturalizing racist practices. The coloniality of knowledge privileged western, modern, and academic knowledge over other forms of knowledge rooted in indigenous, afro-descendant, peasant, female, and popular experiences.

As we sought the political and practical effectiveness of ideas and perspectives over academic sophistication, we had to avoid the academic shut-down of certain discussions, and ensure a connection with concrete experiences and movements. But it also required us to see what words would be relevant for what contexts, or what words could allow translation between these. For example, the word crisis has a very different conceptual meaning in different cultures; it is sometimes seen as a threat, sometimes as an opportunity for change. But it also refers to very different historical experiences. For indigenous Guatemalans and African-Americans in the United States, it is not so obvious that the current crisis significantly differs from their longer historical experiences. It was remarked that for them, life has always been a crisis, with the implication that the current crisis could be seen more as a crisis for the dominant groups in their societies.

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4   The notion of colonial difference states that the division between colonizers and colonized peoples, who were seen as inferior beings, has been institutionalized and naturalized as a fundamental divide that persists in our societies, distinguishing the people who are seen and treated as subjects with rights from the people who are treated as objects of domination and exploitation, and consequently do not enjoy real citizenship, until today. This notion has been worked on in Africa, Asia, and South America in discussions on Subaltern Studies, Post- and De-coloniality.

In a similar way, the language of alternatives – understood as post-capitalist institutions and practices – might make invisible other practices that have always existed and still sustain the lives of millions of peoples around the globe today, such as, for example, the practices of indigenous peoples. Many contemporary alternative practices related to *the commons* reflect, reconstruct, or restore modes of living that existed before contemporary forms of domination. In other cases, alternatives are to be found in the contemporary practices of peoples in the Global South deeply rooted in their ancestral history and current livelihoods, but denigrated as primitive, backward, underdeveloped, or poor.

Finally, knowledge and dialogue are also gendered and embodied. All people regardless of their gender have participated in differentiated ways in knowledge production, and their ways of knowing and perspectives have received very unequal attention and value in our societies. Simultaneously, knowledge is always embodied: we know through our bodies and their ways of being part of society. So women will produce other perspectives and emancipatory knowledges than men, whilst among women themselves, the experiences of indigenous, dalith[5], and black women will again produce other meanings. In our own group, we identified one silence that should be addressed in the future: the perspectives of LGTBQ people and struggles were not explicitly incorporated into the Group's discussion.

All of this means that our dialogues and discussions did not take place in a homogeneous space and community, as is never the case. The choice of words or elaboration of lists and categories always reflects a certain geopolitics of knowledge that we need to take into account in our interactions. For example, western language, terminology, and theory remains hegemonic in many of the analyses of global processes, whilst at the same time Europe and Latin America may be predominant in the global debates on alternatives and social movements. Therefore we need to reach out and open up the debate to other geographies of emancipation in Africa, North America, and Asia – as the Global Group explicitly tries to do.

We also need a critical awareness of the implications of the choice of our words. For example, the modern, liberal, and western grammars of democracy and human rights can be seen as weak grammars for self-determination and dignity. They certainly are useful and even very necessary in some contexts, but limited in others. It is necessary to cross cultural boundaries and subvert or transform colonial difference, both in terms of language and political theory, and by not always taking modern and Western concepts and analytical tools as points of departure for our discussions. For example, we could easily start from the indigenous concept of reciprocity, instead of the modern concept of solidarity, to talk about walking together and alliances between struggles and peoples.

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5   Socially marginalized caste in India, literally meaning the oppressed.

Thirdly, we need to see words through their historical embeddedness, reconstructing the long-term conversations of which they are part. For example, many of the issues that are on the table today were talked about a century ago by DuBois in the conference on pan-Africanism, or in historical debates within the pluralities of the left. Finally, a crucial methodological question is whether all of this complexity can be processed only through spoken language. Some of us stated that dialogues with other languages, through our bodies, emotions, artistic expressions, and spirituality, are crucial for our mutual understanding, for breaking through the limits of our rational analysis, and the strengthening of our relations. In a sense, this happened through the field visit and shared days in Quito and Nabón.

Most definitely, it is precisely all of this complexity that enriched our discussions, and allowed us to get a real grip on the processes evolving in our shared world.

DEMOCRATIZING DEMOCRACY

The first central theme of our collective discussion was the notion of democracy. Contemporary liberal democracies have become distorted and weakened due to the extreme concentration of wealth and mediatic and political power in national and global elites, the emergence of right-wing populism, the corporate capture of the State and the intensification of the state-led criminalization of dissidence. This has produced societies that are merely democratic in form, but increasingly authoritarian and elitist in substance. As experiences of social change have, for the most part, also bred authoritarian regimes – in the Soviet Bloc or more recently with progressive governments in South America – the question of democracy becomes fundamental.

LESSONS ON DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

We understand democracy in its original sense of self-governance, of people deciding their individual and collective futures. Consequently, democracy is not a state of government, but a continuous and multidimensional process that seeks to democratize unequal power relations through political action, enhancing liberties, justice, and the capacity for individual and collective self-determination. As such, the building of a just and democratic society depends on the transformation of all – mutually embedded – systems of domination through the interrelated processes of the dismantling of patriarchy, decolonization, anti-racism, anti-capitalism, and the transformation of predatory relations with Nature. Our case studies showed the diverse and complex faces of these democratizations, far beyond liberal conceptions of democracy.

A first logic of democratization is the transformation of existing institutions and their powerful tendencies towards bureaucratization and their reproduction of the inequalities present in society. In the Ecuadorian county of Nabón, the means of formal liberal local democracy have been stretched and reinterpreted in a participatory and communi-

tarian way, through participatory budgeting and dialogues between the municipality and indigenous communities and productive cooperatives. The municipalism of *Barcelona en común* seeks to open and strengthen spaces for self-determination beyond representative democracy and the division of *public* and *private spheres*, thereby enhancing the capacity of society to control the reproduction of life.

In both cases, local municipal politics are reclaiming power in relation to the central State through the intensification of popular participation, organization, and mobilization. Evidently, this has created tensions, for example in Nabón, regarding mining projects supported by the national government versus the protection of highland ecosystems and forests promoted by the municipality.

Other case studies also show that democratization can happen beyond the exclusive realm of the State, through the building of other collective proceedings or institutions to resolve the problems communities and peoples face. In Greece, practices of collective control over the reproduction of life emerged precisely where the democratically chosen government failed to live up to its promises and people started to organize themselves around the needs of local communities in areas like health care and support for refugees. In Mendha-Lekha, drawing on the generation of independent and shared knowledge in numerous study groups on issues that affect the community, genuinely local decision-making processes were implemented in order to recapture power from the State. The village adapted the temporalities of change to the needs of the process, as the villagers believe that the quality and strength of decisions can only be guaranteed through consensus, based upon equal opportunities for participation and the collective generation of knowledge.

Thirdly, and importantly, democratization also requires profound changes in established political cultures around the world. These changes address patriarchal, colonial, clientelist, and verticalist biases which are deeply inscribed not only in existing institutions, but also in the ways many people currently understand and imagine politics. A good example is the notion of the feminization of politics in Barcelona, which goes far beyond just having a female mayor or the equal representation of women in all institutional bodies. Instead, it proposes the building of a new political ethics/practice/process which breaks with classic power patterns, promoting relations of care, diversity, and consensus-building over those patterns of confrontation, competition, and masculinist power.

Democratization is also about the (re)distribution of control over the means of (re)production – for example the redistribution of the access to land and seeds, in order to make food sovereignty possible on different scales. Here, the case studies show that there are very different ways to redistribute that have significant consequences for the democratizing or emancipatory effects they produce. While Venezuela's rentist and extractivist model has produced a form of redistribution, it is centered on the executive power of the central State, which has led to a strong concentration of power and manifold dependencies.

On the contrary, the experiences of Nabón or Mendha-Lekha show that, on a smaller scale, and if operated from below, redistribution can also happen in ways that, by contrast, disseminate power and contribute to individual and collective emancipation. The question of scale, and how different regulations shape the relations between local and higher scales, giving or taking away competences or budgets, is crucial and should be directly addressed by our struggles. For now, whilst there are positive examples of democracy on smaller scales, their translation into higher levels of coordination, like the national level, is unsatisfactory.

CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION

All of these paths of democratization depend on dynamic relations between political institutions and organized society. Democracy is always a net result of people appropriating decision-making from below in the context of social struggles, which creates new spaces and practices for deliberation and political renovation. New institutions arise, but soon become sclerotic and infected by power struggles and vested interests. Democracy thus requires a constant and conscious process of appropriation from below in order to remain dynamic and profound. Drafted institutions may look excellent on the sketch board, but will only remain democratic if they can be constantly re-invented.

In the case of the Spanish State, the last wave of democratization started with the occupation of the squares (the 15M movement) that questioned the "old regime" and practices of representative democracy. This was a constitutive moment, in which people in the streets and the squares started doing politics in a different way, creating horizontal places for decision-making around the country. *Barcelona en común* is a movement which attempts to translate this grass roots democracy into the spaces of institutional politics by "seizing the institutions," further explained in the chapter on Barcelona. Now in power, the municipalist movement seeks to implement strategies to promote a new ecosystem of movements and institutional experiments – a new institutional structure – which at the same time would preserve the autonomous agenda of the movement.

In Mendha-Lekha, democratization started from people's understanding that their weakness within the Indian State was the consequence of the delegation of their decision-making and power to higher levels and the more distant State through their representatives. So their first struggle was to re-appropriate direct decision-making and establish systems for the generation of knowledge. On the other hand, in Venezuela it was precisely the increasing control exercised by the governing party over communitarian and social movement practices that limited the emancipatory potential of the process.

Thus, democracy is not primarily a question of institutions, formalities, and elections, but a self-determined historical process of the construction and renovation of the best conditions for the people to decide over their own futures, based on dynamic relations between society and formal institutions.

SOME PRECONDITIONS FOR REAL DEMOCRACY:

> Democracy should be understood as an on-going process of democratization within our communities, movements, societies, and States, instead of as a series of technical instruments or mechanisms that can be implemented;

> Democracy as self-governance has to encompass all aspects of life, including issues of gender, care, production, consumption, distribution, reproduction, and economic organization;

> Democracy starts from the recognition of the fundamental right to participate in decision-making about the issues that affect and concern us, which implies the right to actively take part in informal or formal, institutional or legal spaces far beyond the very limited act of voting;

> Democracy also requires the recognition and inclusion of different kinds of knowledge beyond the western/scientific canon, as well as access to sufficient knowledge, skills, and information in order to be able to make complex and informed decisions;

> Democracy needs the creation of meaningful forums, mechanisms, and processes for deliberation and decision-making, including referendums, consultations, citizens assemblies, but also more creative forms like sortation[6] and the use of digital forums and media, where this is possible, in an inclusive way. The precise forms and practices of democracy will be embedded in local histories, cultures, and practices, and will therefore be profoundly plural and in many societies plurinational;

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6   Sortation is a lottery for a political post.

> The recognition of political rights, the access to information and capacities, and the actual functioning of meaningful democratic forums and processes depend on people's individual and collective political self-awareness for these conditions actively realized by its subjects. Since in many societies the institutions that should contribute to the building of political awareness and democratic culture (the media, educational systems, and political parties) tend to promote depoliticization, popular education, alternative communication, and communitarian practices are crucial alternatives to formal political education;

> It is imperative that the State does not have the power to institutionalize certain forms of "permissible" participation and delegitimize others, but that the realm of deliberation is a lively space which is constantly in motion, and determined by the people themselves and their organizations;

> Another important condition is the maturity and wisdom of democratic processes, which implies that majorities do not simply impose their decisions on minorities, but understand that weaker positions are an important contribution and should have greater access to decision-making;

> Finally, in the face of the ecological crisis, we want a democracy that embraces all forms of life, including the different beings and forms of existence commonly referred to as Nature. Some of us use the term earth democracy to describe the democracy we are looking for, in which the rights, voices, and roles of all beings must be considered in the decisions on our collective future.

Some of us think that bottom-up democracy, and the building of confederationalist alliances between spaces of self-governance, might have the biggest democratic potential, constructing new spaces of decision-making which are not centered on the structure of the Nation-State. At the same time, others insist that the struggle for democracy must also be fought within existing national and global structures, as urgent issues like the ecological crisis need to be dealt with on these higher levels.

Diverse political communities are crucial for imagining alternative democracies. These not only include the evident indigenous and farmer communities, but also urban communities, productive associations, even communities in virtual/digital spaces. We are aware that communities should not be idealized, and are themselves spaces for political constructions of justice, dignity, and democracy. Consequently, overcoming oppressive practices and discourses (for example: in terms of patriarchy) implies the building of democratic culture within those communities, the empowerment and organization of minority subjects, and dialogues between different political communities about broader political processes. For example, when the people of Mendha assessed their weaknesses, they not only included their powerlessness before the Nation-State, but also weaknesses created by gender inequity within their village society, and the former could not be addressed successfully without addressing the latter.

It is clear that such a perspective on democracy goes beyond the liberal notions of democracy that have been hegemonic since World War II. In the short term, in the face of the current right-wing populist offensive it might be necessary to also use and defend the grammars and institutions of democracy and human rights in liberal terms, although in the long term, these will need to be expanded or radicalized by other perspectives on self-determination and dignity.

One of the remaining crucial challenges ahead has to do with the institutional forms of these radical democracies: How do they work beyond local communitarian spaces? How can the consistent weakening of transformative local spaces through actions taken at higher levels be avoided? Is it even necessary to go beyond a certain level and how can this be thought about in ways that maybe transcend the local/national/global logic? How can these democracies be sustained? These questions lead us to reflect about the role of the State.

REFOUNDING AND OVERCOMING THE STATE

The State has always been the main object of political theory, where it has been analyzed both as a problem and as a solution. The "conquest" of the State has been – and remains for many – the recurring slogan of leftist movements, which postulates that through the control of the State, dominant relations of power and (re)production can be transformed. In revolutionary times, rather than being abolished, the State has been reimagined, redesigned, and refocused – with rather contradictory results. What is the

State today? To what extent can or should the State have a central role in processes of emancipation? In which way do we need to revolutionize institutions themselves? Can we imagine a State that guarantees the common good, or is the best State the one that illuminates its own dissolution?

The State was one of the most controversial subjects of our group discussion, with positions ranging from anti-statism (see below) to arguments in favor of rebuilding a functioning Welfare State. So, in this section we try to shed light on the shades between these two poles. We all would agree that all currently existing State configurations – be they more presidentialist, more parliamentarian, post-colonial or not, post-socialist or not, etc. – are rather limited in their transformative potential, at least at the national level. At the same time, it is also true that emancipatory social movements have often found allies in staterun bodies and individuals within the State who have supported their struggles. We therefore need to be more precise in our assessment of its emancipatory or anti-emancipatory potential.

ASSESSING THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF THE STATE: SOME EXAMPLES

A serious evaluation of the emancipatory potential of the State should start by recognizing that the State is a complex landscape of interrelated institutions (local, provincial, or departmental and national-level, executive, legislative and judicial, authorities, public health and education systems, state-owned companies, and other state-bodies). It interacts with society in many ways: the State as provider, as regulator, as mediator, as expression of certain interests and power relations, as repressor, etc. The State should therefore be understood as an articulation of different bodies, methods, discourses, roles, and persons, on different geographical scales. However, one of the main objectives and functions of the State is ensuring stable conditions for capital accumulation, building new equilibria in the face of new situations and new challenges to corporate power and interests.

Although the State currently tends to be more a part of the problem than of the solution, certain specific historical constellations show its potential for contributing to positive change as well, particularly when it comes to defensive struggles that aim to stop ecological or social destruction. In Peru, Colombia, and Argentina, local governments participated in the organization of referenda on mining that made the popular rejection of mining projects in their territories evident, and strengthened grassroots struggles. The experiences of Nabón and Barcelona show the possibility of social transformation through, in, and of the State itself, through participatory politics and commoning experiences on a local level. More than 200 cities around the world have taken back municipal control over public services, as a result of concrete struggles and campaigns against privatization by social movements.

On a national level, feminist and LGTBQ movements have advanced the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights, particularly in Europe and Latin America, by combining popular mobilization, legal strategies, and political participation. And affirmative action policies have opened up education and government services to those otherwise excluded on the basis of class, race/ethnicity, or gender.

In Germany, a strong movement against nuclear power catalyzed the creation of the Green Party, which went on to participate in coalition governments. New alliances between parliamentarians, the ongoing social protest movement, and alternative-energy start-ups, which combined resistance, legislation on renewable energies, and experimentation at the practical, technological, and local levels, converged into a majoritarian cultural awareness of the need for a different energy paradigm. In the end, this cultural shift generated new effects on public policies and the economic model, which led to 30 percent of the energy produced in Germany today being renewable.

We also have seen how constitutional processes, for example in Ecuador and Bolivia, but also in South Africa and Tunisia, allowed the incorporation of new rights, like the rights of Nature, into national legal and political spheres. In Colombia, the Constitutional Court has been extremely important in defending human rights and democracy in a country torn apart by civil war and subject to increased political control by paramilitaries. Among its important decisions was the annulment of the so-called Strategic Mining Areas in twenty departments in the country, and the recognition of the right of local governments to reject mining projects by means of referenda, even if these are supported by the national government. Finally, the recent recognition of the rights of rivers in India, New Zealand, and Colombia seems to open new possibilities for their protection.

On the international level, the ILO Convention 169[7] and the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights provided indigenous peoples with new arguments for the defense of their territories and cultures. New juridical figures can offer interesting opportunities for emancipatory politics, although their concrete implementation can be difficult and problematic, and advances in the law are often undone by the initiatives of political adversaries afterwards.

These examples show that state-owned entities and local governments *can* support grassroots innovation and significant efforts aimed at sustainability, the deepening of democracy, and the realization of human rights. However, these examples tend to reflect isolated advances in terms of specific rights or policies for determined groups, and not integral processes of the social transformation of all of society. Therefore, the evaluation of the cycle of progressive governments in Latin America allows a deeper understanding of the potentials and limitations of the State as an agent of social change.

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7   The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989 is an International Labour Organization Convention, also known as ILO-convention 169, or C169. It is the major binding international convention concerning indigenous peoples, and a forerunner of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

After approximately two decades of intense social movement mobilizations in a series of Latin American countries, first against dictatorships and later against neoliberal policies, political forces of the left finally acceded to government at the beginning of the 21st century. A unique opportunity had emerged in which a whole world region could choose an alternative path for regional integration and a relative decoupling from neoliberal globalization, led by progressive governments and backed by strong social movements.

These governments have been quite effective in marking their distance from neoliberal macroeconomics, re-instituting the State's regulatory power, and building a new regional discourse centered on sovereignty against US influence, while at the same time deepening economic relations and dependencies with China. They have implemented a certain redistribution of the extractivist rent through a series of social programs that have diminished statistical poverty significantly. In some cases, they have improved health and education policies by extending the outreach of those public services and giving them better infrastructure.

On the other hand, economic, productive, and wealth structures have remained largely untouched, with the richest getting richer while the poorest became a little less poor. At the same time, consumer culture and modernization have expanded and left their imprints on subjectivities that until that moment had not been completely shaped by capitalist imaginaries. This peculiar model of transformation seems to have relied on a cycle of high commodity prices, and is currently being reversed in many dimensions.

At the same time, Nation-State structures and logics have proven largely resilient to transformation, as the most emancipatory goals of introducing plurinationality and dismantling patriarchy in the State have not gone beyond rhetoric. Instead of deepening democracy, most countries experienced a concentration of power in the executive and a backlash regarding autonomous social organization.

Buen vivir, as a new guiding principle which seeks to re-integrate production with reproduction and human society with Nature, has been re-signified by State institutions, transforming their development plans and indicators into a term synonymous with "development." But most importantly for the debate to which we seek to contribute in this section, the new governments understood the State as having a central role to play in transformative processes. Instead of opening up the existing institutions to plurinationality and wide participation, they increasingly fell into authoritarianism and criminalization, seeing a threat in social movements, NGOs, and organized society as autonomous forces, and creating their own parallel loyal organizations in order to undermine their representativity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STATE POLITICS IN THE SHORT TERM

The examples we discussed in our meeting suggest that the State can play an important role in affirmative political action and in limiting socio-ecological destruction in the short term. In general, this can only happen if active and strong grassroots actors push State agencies or even individual representatives to bear their responsibility for enforcing human rights in practice – as changes within the State always reflect changes in power relations within society. It is only after popular mobilization, the development of proposals for change, and strategic litigation that different parts of the State begin to act, often in contradiction with other State actors.

Particularly at the local level, as the Nabón and Barcelona experiences show, wider margins for emancipatory politics seem to exist, due to the direct relations of grassroots organizations with local governments, and the possibilities for them to exert pressure on and participate in local politics. However, this emancipatory potential requires the transformation of the institutions themselves, with their inherent logics and procedures, to be a consistent part of the strategy of change. But again, the limits of transformation at the local level are also shaped by national and transnational dynamics.

The transformation reached by state-led progressisms in Latin America remained way below the expectations of the protagonists of the previous cycle of social struggles, and it is even often described as a mere modernization and re-legitimization of capitalism, which, during the neoliberal cycle, had reached an impasse in the region. Many of us agree that this reflects the structural limits and problems of the neokeynesian left, but also of the populist right, both of which gained terrain with an aggressive discourse against the consequences of neoliberal globalization, but ended up implementing insufficient policy responses that seek to empower traditional State structures without fundamentally changing its relation with capitalist markets.

The modern State has been a principal agent of "development," creating megaprojects within infrastructure, industries, and resource extraction, and in recent years this has happened all the same under socialist, progressive as well as under neoliberal regimes worldwide. The intensification of the grip of extractivism on many countries especially in the Global South, but in recent times also in the semi-peripheries of the Global North, leads to a particular kind of low-intensity democracy. The control and distribution of the share of the rent that governments can retain leads to strongly centralized State configurations prone to corruption. At the same time extractivism promotes mass consumption as compensation for other kinds of needs.

National governments around the world are under elite control, which enables corporate power and increasingly creates configurations where the State shares or concedes

sovereignty to private companies, like special economic zones and economic corridors. In the contemporary global economy, States are competing for investment sites in global economic value chains, and more and more decisions regarding our societies are made by extra-territorial actors, including other States, corporations, or multilateral bodies. The German or US governments might have more influence on other countries than the people of these countries have themselves, as could be clearly seen in Greece in 2015.[8] Consequently, in particular the post-colonial States in the Global South – as well as some in the North – remain strong in terms of supporting repression and backing the economic interests of national elites, but weak in terms of channeling the interests, demands, and agendas of the people, or of opening spaces for self-determination.

So, we should see the modern liberal Nation-State as a particular historical construct, configured by capitalism and colonialism, as well as by social struggles. Many of its flaws are a consequence of the fact that the State was built upon (or within) the capitalist system, and is founded upon this mode of production. At the same time, contemporary social rights were institutionalized on the basis of social conquests, and participatory and affirmative politics were the result of social struggles.

For the last few decades the State has been going through a process of transformation as a result of a neoliberal restructuring which seeks to undo the gains of social struggles that have been institutionalized in previous decades, as well as its growing internation-alization in the face of global challenges. One of our short-term goals in dealing with the State is to deprivatize power and decommodify the State, promote transparency, fight corruption, and strengthen citizen surveillance of the State and corporate actions.

Another central problem with the State is its use of force and violence. Increasingly, State and parastatal actors are involved in the imposition of extractive projects on indig-enous and peasant territories. In countries like Peru, the police can be contracted by mining companies to organize their security, whilst in India the military is increasingly involved in enforcing extractivism. Around the world, the police also reinforces existing practices of discrimination and exclusion, as we can see in the ethnic profiling and police violence in the United States particularly against people of African descent, or in the

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8   After the government debt crisis (also known as the Greek Depression) faced by Greece in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-08, the country required bailout loans in 2010, 2012, and 2015 from the International Monetary Fund, the Eurogroup, and the European Central Bank. The Eurogroup, led by Germany, demanded extreme austerity measures that prioritized meeting loan payments over effective measures to dynamize the economy, with grave consequences for social security in Greek society. This austerity program was firstly imposed by the government of the social democratic party PASOK in 2010 and continued by a coalition government between PASOK, a right-wing party (ND), and center-left party (DIMAR) in 2012-2015. In January 2015, five years after the first bailout program, SYRIZA, a coalition of the radical left in Greece, took power and formed a coalition government with ANEL (a center-right party) by promising a sustainable plan for managing the debt crisis and overcoming austerity. However, in the end, and despite mass opposition expressed by the people in the referendum of July 2015, the government struck a new loan agreement in July/August 2015 that perpetuated previous austerity packages, promoting privatization schemes for public land and infrastructure; wage cuts; divestment of the pension system; and a deepening of external, EU supervision of all State policies.

extremely violent wars on drugs in the Philippines, Mexico, and Colombia that particularly affect poor people and populations of color, and especially women and children. So, another crucial issue in the short term has to do with the demilitarization of our States, and with the deprivatization of their security apparatus.

Finally, there is an urgent need for reflection about what we mean by "social inclusion," as most state-led social programs of monetary assistance create dependency and paternalism, and encourage participation in capitalist markets and consumption instead of strengthening autonomy and alternatives modes of living. Due to their abandonment and discrimination by the State, in the past many indigenous peoples, tribal and dalith communities, people of African origins, and other marginalized groups have maintained their solidarity and autonomous capacity for organizing daily life in the face of many threats.

This capacity of the excluded to resist adverse conditions should be recognized as a great strength that also contains many seeds for transformation, as their very exclusion from dominant logics has opened up spaces for different logics of (re)production at the margins. Therefore, we should not frame them as needy, poor, and without skills, but find ways to strengthen those groups at the margins within their own sociocultural and spiritual logics, without exposing them to market forces or making them dependent on paternalistic State subsidies.

THE WELFARE STATE

One of the most intense debates of our meeting concerned the relevance of the Welfare State as a horizon of transformation and the possibilities for radically democratic policies in the context of the crisis of the Welfare State.

In this regard the Greek experience shows an important dilemma. Many of the promoters of autonomous spaces in Greece insist that they do not intend to replace the State. Whilst they want to assure social rights through their autonomous initiatives on health care, housing, and other services, in response to the State's neoliberal withdrawal, at the same time, these efforts demand that the Greek State assume its responsibilities for ensuring social inclusion and as a guarantor of rights.

Of course, other autonomous and anarchist perspectives are also present within the Greek experience, but the crucial question posed here also found echoes in other realities like the United States or France. To what extent can our movements and struggles resolve the concrete daily problems of people who cannot do this themselves in a sustainable way? Is it realistic to think of a communitarian prefigurative politics of care that would sustain society as a whole? It was noted that we cannot expect people to engage in endless struggle and conflict, as we also want to defend their right to leisure and enjoyment of life. While mainly people from countries of the North expressed their doubts about whether such a strategy really could involve popular sectors, or would

end up instead as initiatives that mainly benefit the middle class, in southern countries which have never experienced an integral Welfare State, the commoning of certain aspects of care was often driven by the popular sectors themselves, simply out of need.

We found it necessary to historicize the current reality of Welfare States in Europe. Across most of the continent, these were not simply initiated by the State, but built up from below through welfare initiatives, social struggle, and collective negotiations by trade unions and the civil society. It was, again, these prefigurative policies that were later institutionalized by the State. Some members of our group, mostly from countries where Welfare States have existed, argue that as the Welfare State is the result of a people's conquest of their rights, it should be defended.

The opposite perspective present in the meeting was one critical of the Welfare State as a relevant political project for several reasons. According to this view, one problem is that transformative actors often limit their own autonomous politics to small experiments because they are waiting for the State to take over, in the context of the "illusion of the Welfare State." The imaginary of the Welfare State locates the responsibility for solving citizens' problems within the State. But welfare programs orchestrated by the State usually implement national modern standards which homogenize all cultural differences and define needs from above, mostly prioritizing access to money, goods, and services. This not only makes invisible other relational or cultural needs, which communitarian welfare could easily address. It also turns State welfare into a way of dispossessing people of their diverse and contextualized abilities, capacities, knowledges, and practices of self-determination. State welfare often weakens local resistances and movements as it creates dependencies and deepens clientelism. From this perspective, the Welfare State can be seen more as an instrument for the salvation of capitalism in crisis than as a horizon of transformation.

Also, the idea of the Welfare State as a political ideal reinforces the idealization of Europe as the result of the path towards "development" and progress, which all peoples and societies should follow. A more precise historical analysis shows that the Welfare State has been a historical exception in geographical and chronological terms, which applied only for a few decades to a very small part of the world. Its possibility depended on the historical international division of labor and Nature, through which the necessary resources were transferred to the North. It is this historical exception that spread across the whole world (post-colonial societies) through the promise of "development."

Finally, the viability of the Welfare State was called into question in our debates. The geopolitical conditions that allowed its creation have changed dramatically over the last decades.

The Welfare State was possible due to:

> the massive transfer of wealth from the South to populations in the North;

> the abundance of very cheap energy;

> a predatory relationship with Nature focused on continuous growth, in an era in which there seemed to be no limits to its exploitation;

> the fact that, as long as "the others" were elsewhere (the colonized people stayed in their own countries, the claim of universalized rights was possible, as it concerned only a few privileged people. Both globalization and massive migration have changed this situation, as many "others" are now demanding to be included as well; and finally,

> the challenge of Soviet-bloc socialism and the experience of war made social reform necessary in capitalist countries, in order to undercut the fierce social struggles for radical change in their own countries.

According to this reasoning, the Welfare State is no longer even possible in Europe, so we should seek out other paths for securing social rights in both the Global South and North that lead in the direction of commoning them, while asking of the State only to ensure favorable conditions for this.

The dialogue between these two positions on the Welfare State allowed the emergence of other perspectives. In general, it was agreed that in the short term, local contexts will vary, and will require diverse State operations and attitudes that might resemble social welfare policies against poverty and inequality. However, radical reformist State politics implies both the enforcement of social rights for its citizens, and the promotion of autonomy and participation. New ways of organizing are necessary, and the perspective of the commons opens up a window in this direction.

In the short term, of course, the State will be the main institutionalizing mechanism, but in the long term we do need other, more flexible and diverse ways to institutionalize the commons which guarantee elements of welfare as an alternative to the centralizing, rigid, bureaucratic, homogenizing, and paternalistic State. So the question we need to answer is: what would our institutionalized commons look like? And how could the localized commons that are emerging throughout the world coordinate and connect to address complex issues like energy sovereignty on inter-local or other levels?

Also, in the context of financialization and automatization, new debates beyond the Welfare State emerge. Crucial questions are: how do we share available employment opportunities since there will be less formal paid work available? How do we value – both in terms of financial retribution, as well as recognition of its crucial importance – necessary work in all its forms, including care work, subsistence work, and commu-

nity work? And how do we distribute wealth in all its dimensions? How do we even understand wealth beyond its material dimensions? It is necessary to go beyond the historical relationship between wages, rights, and participation. Some of us regard the idea of a basic income as an alternative worth discussing, as it recognizes autonomously productive and caring subjects who are not linked to wages. This, however, is an open debate for the future as it could also be coopted for capitalist interests. And it has to be assessed from a critical North/South perspective, as most experiments in this respect have taken place in the North.

IMAGINING OTHER INSTITUTIONS, ARTICULATIONS, AND AUTHORITIES: PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS, POLYCENTRICITY, AND PLURINATIONALITY

There are fundamental ambivalences in how processes of multidimensional transformation relate to the State. The subjects of social change experience State power as expropriating, repressive, promoting new enclosures and processes of privatization, but at the same time, they are less vulnerable to corporate power if the State regulates and intervenes in their favour. We have seen how in the short term the State can be helpful in defending rights and limiting socio-ecological destruction, and how the necessity and urgency of globally coordinated answers to the ecological crisis cannot wait for new political institutions to emerge. However, as a group we would agree that in the long term a deep transformation of State institutions will be necessary to address the challenges the world is facing. We therefore discussed how political action against socio-ecological destruction in the short term can be combined with strategies aimed at transforming State institutions along the way.

Considering the potentials and differentiated realities of the State for social transformation, but also the difficulties and failures of state-led transformation in the past, we propose to demystify the centrality of the State for multidimensional transformation, a basic attitude that some of us call *anti-Statism*. This does not mean that we reject the incorporation of the State into transformatory strategies, but we do reject the idea that it would be the most important actor of change. We also reject the centralizing, homogenizing, and bureaucratizing tendencies present in state-centred politics and the concentration of power in all its forms (men over women, human beings over Nature, but also State over society). A critical attitude towards State mystification also rejects the securitization, militarization, and criminalization of dissidence, and should open horizons of political imagination beyond existing forms of governance and authority that have been severely infringed in contemporary political history and in certain strands of left-wing ideology.

Moving beyond state-centred politics creates visibility and support for thousands of alternatives around the world, relating to issues such as health, education, food produc-

tion, and consumption. The term "institution" should therefore not be understood only in terms of State politics. Throughout history, institutions have also been created from below, by the people, to resolve problems with and challenges to their existence. Popular kitchens were founded to fight hunger throughout Latin America and Europe; women's organizations have created numerous modes of mutual care, support, and protection around the globe; indigenous communities around the world now manage common goods like forests or water through ancestral rules and procedures; and autonomous councils have been established to organize popular neighbourhoods in order to guarantee access to water in urban contexts or to bring security and social protection in many global metropoles.

So our discussion also considers the rules and procedures people and social movements create themselves, for example, when governing a commons. This form of institutionality, in opposition to the one which is part of the State, is often much more fluid and can adapt to local circumstances, cultural practices, and problems on the basis of collective agreements. The process of Mendha Lekha village, for example, shows such oral-based, non-rigid institutionality. At the same time, it is also necessary to see that State institutions themselves are not given and permanent, but in a constant process of readjustment which precisely reflects social struggles and the influence of autonomous institutions from below. The case of Nabón shows that the transition between both can be continuous.

Global Working Group at a meeting with indigenous leader Juana Morocho, Nabón, Ecuador

These prefigurative practices open a window towards a society that does not depend on the modern Nation-State to resolve its problems and issues, and allows us to imagine a bottom-up strategy for social change. Still, we face the huge challenge of imagining a kind of institutionality that is able to provide the necessary social coordination and is not as useful to existing power relations and capital accumulation as the modern liberal Nation-State. One important perspective for the transformation of the existing Nation-State remains plurinationality. We saw that in spite of the difficulties and structural contradictions it encountered in Latin America, plurinationality evokes a prospect of change which is relevant to the whole post-colonial world.

The struggles of the Ogoni and Ijaw communities against corporate power and corruption demonstrated that social transformation would only be possible through a constituent process which rewrites the rules of engagement between the different peoples of Nigeria and the State, on the basis of the self-determination of the people. In spite of the pluriculturality of most of our societies, in most cases the State is organized as a monocultural Nation-State based on the institutions and political practices of one dominant culture, producing colonial subjects and destroying autonomous cultural practices. Plurinationality is an idea that allows us to challenge and subvert the colonial matrix of power.

Two countries have confronted the issue of the Nation-State in Latin America (Bolivia and Ecuador). In both cases, monocultural States had been imposed on pluricultural societies through a particular political system that colonized society. The rules, mechanisms, and subjects of participation were defined in colonial terms. After two decades of intense indigenous mobilization, the constitutional processes in Bolivia and Ecuador decreed the subversion of this colonial monocultural State through moves toward the construction of a plurinational State where pre-existing communitarian and participatory democracy, but also plural justice, education, and health systems, would be recognized and coexist with representative democracy and its institutions. This was a big challenge, because the limits of the State itself were not questioned. Geopolitics did not allow the experiment to go any further than this.

The practical efforts of transformation have not been successful – in Ecuador the modernization project of the Citizen Revolution led to the strengthening of the western-shaped Nation-State, whilst in Bolivia, a huge network of clientelism absorbed much of the existing social tissue and bound it to the central government and ruling party. However, it is also true that the recognition of plurinationality opened up local spaces for politics in another way, as we saw in Nabón, and similar processes exist in other places like Cotacachi in Ecuador or Charagua Iyambae in Bolivia. These processes consist of continuous experimentation and creativity, and face fundamental tensions

with the national economy and government, but they maintain an aspiration towards the realization of plurinationality.

Another crucial question has to do with scales and the articulation of local alternatives: how can we make local experiences of alternatives more influential in broader society? Can they end up replacing hegemonic economic and political practices by linking up with each other? In India, within social movements the phrase "scaling out" is used as an alternative to the western and corporate "scaling up," evoking the Gandhian idea of oceanic circles.[9] This implies that similar and simultaneous processes seek to spread horizontally and create links, which in turn creates better opportunities for effecting change on higher and more structural levels. The same idea resonates in Kurdish democratic confederationalism, and in the political perspectives of the Zapatistas.

Such a perspective could redraw State organization in the long term, opposing notions of polycentricity to both centralized Nation-States and the more (post-)modern tendencies towards the decentralization of the State. Even the decentralized State is pyramidal and has a top that coordinates and concentrates power, and regional and local instances which respond to the national government. Polycentricity works from a local level, clustering different local experiences of alternatives, involving horizontal dissemination and weaving.

In contemporary urbanized, technicized, and globalized societies, local alternatives require capital to strengthen their economies and inclusiveness; information and technology for sustainability and communication; exchange and alternative markets for their products and for responding to their needs. But why should this be done by the State? Through polycentricity, this could be done in a more horizontal, communal way that reinforces resilience and relative self-sufficiency, but also creates relations of solidarity, mutual exchange, and markets in a more just and localized way. But how can this be powerful enough to bring about at least a partial decoupling from broader economic processes? How can the appetites of transnational corporations, which increasingly rely on private security or paramilitary forces to secure their grip on territories, whilst at the same time implementing sophisticated strategies for the co-optation of communities, be resisted?

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9   The oceanic circle describes Gandhi's vision of social organization. Gandhi believed that for a non-violent society to achieve lasting peace, it must be organized in a decentralized way. In Gandhi's words: "Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. (...) In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units." http://mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/oceanic-circle/.

These bottom-up processes of restructuring society and weaving new relations will inevitably question existing boundaries imposed by the state-building process. In India, there is an example of the retaking of power over a river basin[10]; in other societies, eco-regions based on shared eco-systems, histories, and cultures have also been the basis of political organization, subverting artificial political borders within and between countries. This prompts us to look more closely at biocultural governance systems and practices. It might not be about "taking" the Nation-State as currently formulated, but about giving it less importance in our processes as a first step, widening spaces of autonomy and self-determination, and in a second step transforming it *de facto* from below, once the balance of power has shifted on the ground.

Within our group, diverse positions co-existed on how to combine these short- and long-term strategies aimed at the State, as well as on the probability and difficulties relating to the construction of a truly alternative way of organizing society. However, we did agree that this should be one of the central debates for the reinvention of left-wing politics, as we will see in the next section.

Members of the Global Working Group during the internal meeting in Puembo, Ecuador

10   See: http://edepot.wur.nl/95014.

REINVENTING THE LEFT

All previous discussions present questions on political subjects and actors. What kind of agency can be at the basis of multidimensional transformation? What political actors can reconfigure the liberal modern State? And what political subjects can articulate the commons?

Historically, left-wing political organizing played a central role in connecting struggles and providing them with shared utopian horizons. However, its role in emancipatory politics has grown increasingly ambivalent, due to its difficulties in overcoming state- and class-centered, productivist, and "economicist" politics and vanguardist practices. At the same time, the global left remains the principal reference point for the organization and action against capitalism in the world, so that its refoundation on new grounds seems necessary for multidimensional transformation. We therefore wanted to assess and discuss the role of the left(s) in global emancipatory politics.

WHAT'S LEFT?

We had started our meeting by acknowledging that any discussion on emancipatory politics should go beyond the left, as emancipations and revolutions have been realized by a plurality of actors, of which many are not necessarily part of the organized left. At the same time, our discussions revealed that in the social processes in which we have participated, in general there has been some kind of presence of left-wing organizing and discourse, and all of us have maintained relationships with left-wing politics throughout our lives and engagements, so that the "othering" of the left(s) would be problematic as well.

Secondly, we saw that there are many different contexts in which the left emerged in many parts of the globe. In Greece, the whole spectrum of emancipatory politics – including social movements – is related in one way or another (theoretical, by tradition/heritage, or for practical reasons) to left-wing political organizations. In India, a deep divide exists between social movements which tend to have Gandhian orientations, the "political left" that mostly acts through party and institutionalized politics, and the Maoists who still engage in armed struggle. In Spain, the left has become outflanked by the waves of the "indignados" who have raised the question of whether left-wing discourses, organizational practices, and political instruments are still able to represent what was called the struggle against the "political caste."

The analysis of multiple local processes allows us to understand how the left is being reinvented in concrete places and histories throughout the world. Roughly, a divide can be identified between those parts of the left still very much rooted in

classical Marxist thinking, with its focus on class analysis, anti-imperialism, and the male wage labor subject at its center, and those more deeply influenced by critiques of capitalism's race, gender, and Nature relations, and are consequently supportive of indigenous, black, environmentalist, and feminist struggles. This division between a traditional and new (post-1968) left has been analyzed extensively in academia, and should not be regarded as absolute. New left formations, of course, tend to take into account class analysis and imperialism, whilst the traditional left has also been influenced by feminism and indigenous struggles. On the other hand, the debate on the situation in Venezuela in 2017 – particularly within the Latin American left – shows how real and deeply polarizing this divisive line can become.[11]

A plural understanding of "the left" is also necessary for overcoming historical reductionism, which understands the left only through its contemporary hegemonic currents. Leninist and Maoist lefts are dominant in many societies, particularly in Latin America, Europe, and Asia. However, both political history and theory of the left are far more heterogeneous than these currents. For example, the anarchist left was very influential in the decades before and after 1900, but was finally defeated in its efforts to build alternative societies. The left all over the world was inspired by the perspectives of Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg, who were in many senses critical of hegemonic Leninist thought, and many parts of the non-Western left were inspired by interpretations of Marxist thought according to local realities (like José Carlos Mariátegui and the dependence theorists in Latin America or Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral in Africa).

These subalternized traditions have been far more aware of the challenges posed by contemporary social movements to the institutionalized left around gender, culture and ethnicity, power and development. And they were far closer to the political perspectives of autonomy, self-determination, and the commons that have gained terrain in emancipatory politics in recent decades. Therefore it is imperative to recuperate the plural history of the left, and to recognize that there is such a thing as a broad "left culture" that inspires critical grassroots political action and discourse around the globe, beyond left-wing political parties. This left culture can be far more appealing than the politics based on narrow and rigid left-wing identities and political parties and other organizations.

Taking these refinements into account, the first crucial question would be whether the left/right divide is still relevant in the contemporary world. We would say that this divide remains useful in different contexts and issues, particularly in relation to

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11   This dossier composed by TNI and CLACSO gives a clear insight into the different leftist perspectives on the crisis in Venezuela: https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/venezuela-en1.pdf.

inequality, social rights, imperial geopolitics, and the assessment of the impact of capitalism. However, many of us would state that on other issues, left versus right is not the fundamental dividing category, and can even create divisions and difficulties for concrete struggles. Although this might vary according to different realities, on environmental issues, indigenous rights, gender justice, and engagement with democracy, leftist currents can adopt very conservative positions.

Global Working Group, conversation with Nabón's mayor Magali Quezada and representatives of local authorities, May 2017

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LEFT

Throughout its history, the left has created different ways of doing politics, both within institutions and through its huge influence on social movements, struggles for independence, and local processes of self-determination, with both positive and negative results.

Without left-wing discourses and organizations pushing for democracy and social justice, the world would be far worse off, as numerous examples of left-wing contributions to emancipation show. Cooperativism, participatory budgeting, and worker-ownership were created from below as alternative modes of production or decision-making. Popular education and communication provided peoples around the world with instruments and information that allowed them to shape or influence their futures.

The conquest of social rights by people in Europe and North America allowed the construction of the Welfare State; the support of the emancipation of indigenous peoples in Latin America contributed to victories in the form of land reforms and new constitutions; and the participation in liberation movements in Africa and Asia contributed to former colonial States' independence from the imperial powers.

Nowadays, we can identify multiple crises of the left. Left-wing parties have moderated their discourses and programs significantly, whilst their militancy and even electoral support have decreased over the last decades (although of course in specific electoral conjunctures, the opposite of this general tendency can occur). Some of us argued that most currents of the left are fighting capitalism on its own battlefield, for example when social change is narrowly framed around money and the redistribution of material wealth – making other values and dimensions of the symbolic and material reproduction of life invisible. Or when the lefts emulate capitalist tactics and strategies, like charismatic unipersonal leadership, or media and electoral politics, and in doing so prioritize recognition by the political establishment over radical politics from below.

The different elements of the organized left have had difficulties connecting with emerging political cultures and processes related to autonomy, horizontalism, and self-organization, a struggle which led directly to the massive protests at specific historical moments around the globe in recent years. And finally, as seen before, other political groups, including right-wing conservatives, have co-opted parts of the "natural" left-wing agenda, electorate, and, in some cases, even parts of its utopian outlook or language of change.

Of course, it is true that left-wing organizations and emancipatory processes have been undermined, repressed, criminalized, and attacked by national elites and international agendas, and that active campaigns to discredit left-wing culture, language, and organizations have taken place – often effectively – around the world. However, this historical crisis of the lefts is also very much the result of their own historical and contemporary limitations and contradictions, present of course in different intensities and variations within the plurality of processes.

ELEMENTS OF THE CRISIS OF THE LEFT:

> **Political theory and utopian outlook**
The left has often failed to truly incorporate all dimensions of domination in their critique of society and political strategies, maintaining their original agenda based on class and anti-imperialist struggle. As such, it has failed to challenge the deeper patterns of western capitalist civilization, which is founded on patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and predatory relations with Nature. Simultaneously, a state-centric and developmentalist utopian horizon has maintained hegemony in a large part of leftist discourse, creating a preference for electoral politics and a positive attitude towards economic growth and the over-exploitation of Nature for the sake of economic redistribution. This failure to challenge the epistemological framework established by capitalist modernity, for example the binary division between Nature and culture, or the reliance on modern science and technology, has limited the scope of the left's utopia severely.

> **Other dimensions of politics**
Consequently, the left has had difficulties in understanding and incorporating other dimensions of knowledge, struggle, and politics, like religion and spirituality, culture and identity, emotions, the dimension of subjective or personal change, as well as joy and celebration. It is precisely these elements that have been crucial to many of the youth, indigenous, women, LGTBQ, and other struggles around the world;

> **Alliances and social movements**
The left has often maintained instrumental relations with social movements. Instead of supporting grassroots struggles and incorporating their demands and proposals into a left-wing agenda, they have tried to direct these struggles towards the "real" political agenda for change. Such vanguardist practices have slowed down the incorporation of environmentalist, indigenous, and feminist struggles in the left's agendas, and these issues usually still remain secondary to issues of economic justice;

> Political culture
Within the left, ideology and "ideological identity politics" centered on having the "right political conscience" (e.g. Trotskyist, Maoist, etc.) remain an overwhelming and divisive reality which often absorbs existing social energies for the effective transformation of sociocultural reality. There is a tradition in the left in which differences are inflated on the inside, whilst from the outside the lefts are seen as a homogeneous but conflictive bloc. Ideological conflicts are mixed with a culture of power disputes, which both favor fragmentation and division, as well as an intolerance towards plurality, dissidence, or genuinely open debate;

> Learning
Particularly over recent decades the left has had great difficulty in learning from its own practices, as well as from other struggles. Their focus on the capture of the State, either through military organizations or through elections, has inspired a vanguardist, vertical political culture which tends to give pre-fabricated answers instead of asking new questions. This has resulted in huge problems in terms of learning and innovation;

> Governing for radical reform
The left has often succeeded in bringing about social transformation and radical reform more effectively while in opposition than in government. A series of historical experiences in different parts of the world has shown that once the left acceded to government, the desire to be accepted politically as a serious option, as well as the underestimation of the intrinsic logics and dynamics of State institutions, led to the postponement of more radical change. In other cases, the left was prepared to win elections, but not to govern. The most successful experiences of left-wing governments usually took place at a local level.

REFOUNDATIONS IN PRACTICE

The crisis of the lefts has led to different processes relating to the reinvention of emancipatory politics, within and beyond the left. The Spanish case allows an interesting illustration of this point.

The mobilizations of 15M didn't only reject the government and its neoliberal policies, but also questioned the traditional left and its collaboration with neoliberal reform. To many people on the street, leftist culture seemed alienating, and new movements were seen as more attractive because of their horizontalism, their practices of direct democracy, and their dynamism. The municipalism of *Barcelona en Comú* and other projects emerged as an attempt to take this energy to the arena of institutionalized and electoral politics (which has proved difficult). At the same time, left-wing experiences, organizations, and cadres have played crucial roles in these new processes of mobilization, and in the (re-)invention of the strategy to "seize the institutions" in cities like Barcelona, since many people originated from different left-wing processes. On a national level, *Podemos* also sought to talk to the people beyond the languages and spaces of the left, in a different vocabulary, following the example of the Latin American populist movements in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Argentina.

We discussed the advantages and threats of this "post-ideology frame" as a basis for the refoundation of emancipatory politics. On the one hand, both grassroots movements (like the *Indignados* or *Occupy*) and new institutional politics (*Barcelona en Comú* or *Podemos*) were capable of creating new languages, identities, and political movements that appealed to bigger proportions of the population than the historical base of the left. They questioned both the concentration of wealth and power in the one percent, but also reject traditional left-wing politics and representative democracy, engaging new people who were skeptical of the role of left-wing parties in emancipatory politics.

At the same time, these "leftist" or progressive populisms, like *Podemos* in Spain, *Kirchnerismo* in Argentina, or the "*citizen's revolution*" led by Correa in Ecuador, resonate with right-wing populisms, such as that of Trump in the US, Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, or Wilders in the Netherlands. Both kinds of populist discourses share certain anti-emancipatory characteristics, in terms of the issues and feelings of discontent they mobilize, the personalism present in their political strategy, and in the lack of answers to the underlying structural processes that made them emerge: communities being torn down by capitalist restructruring, rising individualism and consumerism as dominant cultural practices, as well as the deep transformations in democratic deliberation which are caused by the massive use of social media.

Both types of populist formations are successful in mobilizing crowds, but this is insufficient for effecting the changes the world needs. Significant multidimensional transformation requires the construction of counterpower capable of implementing change, as is more proper to the left-wing strategy of the building of cadres, organizations, and movements with a shared utopian vision. In many parts around the world, the left remains the only force that really seeks to confront capitalism and its disastrous effects in a continuous and strategic way, but to be really effective it has to do so differently, and open up to the multiplicity of struggles taking place.

IS THERE A FUTURE LEFT?

Our discussion on the left is part of the bigger discussion on what political subjects correspond to the theories of change we have been presenting. What kind of political actors or relations can implement differentiated strategies for the short and long term, work in and outside of institutions, connect alternatives with resistances, and act on local, national, and global levels? Evidently, our discussion does not lead us to one new privileged, homogeneous, and unique political subject as its representation or vanguard, in the way that the working class male was for the left.

Instead, we see multiple and heterogeneous political subjects, capable of connecting different struggles with each other and acting in different scenarios at the same time. We frame these subjects as eco-systems of different types of actors who share emancipatory horizons. Within such eco-systems of change, the presence of a powerful organized and renovated left is important, as it acts as a bulwark against right-wing economics and policies, and against the "machines of social and ecological destruction" in the short term, and might contribute to deeper transformations in the long term. This is especially true if we go beyond the discredited left-wing political parties, giving credit to the presence of a plural and broad leftist culture and values that inspire grassroots organizations and struggles in the contemporary world.

We have also seen that the left is being reinvented in many places simultaneously, based on local histories and situated conditions. Broadly, these refoundations require the recuperation of the left's own plural histories, and also its engagement in critical dialogue, learning processes, and constructive alliances with indigenous, feminist, Gandhian, and other emancipatory movements that have often maintained differences with the left.

SOME ELEMENTS FOR THE REINVENTION OF THE LEFTS INCLUDE:

> **Political culture** – A rupture inside the left is necessary in terms of political culture, as emergent movements merge with other political practices. Authoritarianism, vertical political practices, and masculinist (and sometimes even militarist) political culture should be transformed and overcome. Diversity, decentralization (or polycentricity), rotation, horizontalism, and the feminization of politics should be part of the renovation of political culture. Indigenous political practices based on assembly-logics, complementarity, reciprocity, relationality, and correspondence can be a good inspiration;

> **Alliances and social movements** – The left-wing principles and central ideas of profound social change itself, solidarity, equality, and others, remain crucial in the current context, and are an adequate base for participating in and relating with emergent emancipatory struggles and movements. The support for concrete local or thematic struggles, beyond the left / right divide, can allow a reconnection with new movements and agendas. Yet the participation in these movements should not be motivated by a conviction that we already know all the answers based on some narrow ideologically determined toolkit, as often has been the case, but by the will to learn and discover new paths together;

> **Political theory and utopianism** – Marx's theories are still very relevant as a tool for the analysis of some dimensions of contemporary capitalism. They have been – and continue to be – updated and complemented by other kinds of cultural analysis, political ecology, feminist critical theory, anti-racism, and decoloniality. Non-Marxist progressive theories are relevant as well and have positively influenced struggles. We need to overcome Eurocentric thinking and polarizing theories and practices that reinforce a Cartesian and binary world view (humanity vs. Nature, man vs. woman, friend vs. enemy, self vs. other). A multidimensional perspective on transformation requires a far more complex theory of change than the state-centered strategic perspective that remains hegemonic in a large part of the left. Cultural change, the building of self-determination, and knowledge about processes for extending the commons should be crucial elements of a refounded left-wing political theory.

> **Learning** – The left needs to reengage with its own histories to learn from them, and recuperate the diverse lefts among different cultures through the building of historical balances within different countries or regions. For those of us who identify as left, we need to learn from both our own experience and from other struggles. This requires learning from complexity and from the contradictions in our struggles (instead of seeking to eliminate or do away with those contradictions). It also means patience and the commitment to long-term struggles, as the changes we seek are complex and need time.

These processes that are part of the refoundation of the left also present dilemmas. Although we see the necessity of intercultural dialogue regarding the grammars of social transformation, we discussed to what extent concepts and discourses from outside of a certain cultural space can be useful for emancipatory politics within this space. Can the idea of *Buen Vivir* – which is actively promoted as a South American source of inspiration for European movements nowadays – be relevant for the refoundation of the European left? But also: to what extent can European concepts serve as the foundation of a new left in the Global South, or become the basis for a global dialogue on emancipatory politics?

In a general sense, we would say that the recuperation of the plural and local histories of the left, but also the recognition of social struggles beyond the left, are crucial elements for the strengthening of a plural emancipatory politics. Secondly, we would say that intercultural dialogue can enrich our political grammars and strategies. For example, a dialogue between theories, notions, and practices of the commons in different places of the world and indigenous community thinking seems relevant. Of course, we should not seek to blindly apply any external recipe, but we do need to learn from the advancements of other cultures and movements, through the creative appropriation and translation of external concepts into our own contexts. Finally, it is also imperative to decolonize the global debate on emancipation and social transformation, as it still is principally held in European and modern languages and through European conceptual frameworks. It is worthwhile analyzing the world, and developing agendas and utopian perspectives, through the lenses and grammars offered by non-western struggles.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AND RECIPROCITY

Finally, responding to the purpose of a global working group, our debates addressed the need for a rethinking of the concepts and traditions of solidarity and internationalism. Solidarity and internationalist relations have been central to leftist thinking and action throughout history, as class struggle was an internationalist endeavor. Solidarity between workers' and independence movements have been fundamental for emancipatory politics, while at the same time solidarity was conditioned during the 20th century by the complex geopolitical alignment logic of the Cold War. The historiography of solidarity – at least what is understood under this term – is as Eurocentric as the dominant history of the left itself, and the geopolitics of solidarian relationships have drawn a map in which Europe and Latin America are overrepresented, with few exceptions, such as the Middle East, Southern Africa or Vietnam in the late 1960s/1970s.

In the age of globalization, political and economic processes are becoming more interdependent and global than ever before, whilst the ecological crisis implies a global

threat to humankind as a whole. Thus, multidimensional transformation and strategies for social change also need to be more global than ever before. While the colonial international division of labor and Nature is still at work, the terms Global North and Global South are obviously a simplification. The imperial mode of living has already spread from the classic capitalist centers to the elites and middle classes of the so-called emerging economies and many so-called developing countries as well. On the other hand, social exclusion, poverty, and even the effects of extractivism are also present in countries of the Global North. Examples of this include fracking, or mountain-top removal in the United States. We basically use these terms (Global North and Global South) to describe the gap opened up by colonial difference.

Within this context, at the beginning of the new millennium, the *World Social Forum* (WSF) and its slogan "Another world is possible" emerged as a unique space for solidarity and networking between different struggles and geographies, contributing enormously to the building of shared perspectives on change for at least one generation of activists and social movements. By becoming an open space for self-organization and the convergence of all struggles, the WSF also questioned traditional internationalist practices, which were often shaped by hierarchical organizations and class-centered politics. Over the last few years, however, the WSF has lost its dynamism and centrality in international social movements. Reasons for this include the problem that it did not produce sufficient action or agreements, that it did not manage to remain independent from its functionalization by left-wing governments in Latin America, and that it became more of a space for a transnational activist elite with little grassroots participation. However, in our meeting, several participants stated that their local processes, for example, in Venezuela and Tunisia, benefited enormously from the WSF, as the versions of the Forum in their countries allowed new alliances, introduced new political perspectives, and inspired local struggles.

Within this context, we wanted to revise the current realities of solidarity and internationalism.

AID AND COOPERATION

Since World War Two, the reorganization of international relations along the dividing line between development and underdevelopment that replaced the former colonial worldview of civilized vs. uncivilized worlds has shaped a hegemonic sense of solidarity around cooperation and aid, basically organized through thousands of projects that have mobilized millions of dollars. Generally, these were supposed to meet certain "development" goals formulated by western experts, who also "scientifically" define the "needs" of receptor populations. Other projects were also aimed at humanitarian relief in contexts of hunger or natural disaster.

Without a doubt, there is a broad range of practices and political perspectives within the sector of development cooperation. These include technocratic cooperation through State agencies and international institutions, as well as a certain technical civil society cooperation which has concentrated on the modernization of agriculture and the introduction of capitalist modes of production in the postcolonial world, as in the context of the so-called "Green Revolution." Other strands of the sector, which emanated for example from trade-union movements in the North, have gone much further in building real political solidarity with revolutionary processes in the Global South (like with Nicaragua), supporting the indigenous and women's movements, the struggle against apartheid, or local processes of resistance against extractivism. Although these processes were supported through State funding, as well as by direct donations from their social constituencies in the Global North, these organizations sought to extend the boundaries of what "development cooperation" allowed them to do. And finally, there has been a direct solidarity cooperation which understood itself more in political terms than in terms of development cooperation, driven as it was by all sorts of collectives, and political and social organizations.

In the context of economic financialization and of the foreign debt crisis of many southern countries in the 1980s, a structural shift took place. Many processes, even those relating to social movements and resistance, began to revolve around donor money, its timely "delivery" in projects, its transparent management, etc. This led to the transformation of many social movements into clusters of thematic NGOs, which then competed with one another for funds instead of being allies. Those NGOs provided formal employment for activists, but also grew increasingly donor dependent, vertically structured, and bureaucratized by "project logics" – a process of alienation that has had a huge impact on the emancipatory potential of those actors and on the strategies of solidarity and internationalism.

In the last few decades, we have seen new tendencies towards the homogenization of the diverse world of international NGOs and development cooperation schemes within a neoliberal and technocratic framework. This has meant a shift away from support for grassroots processes of social organization and transformation to support for projects that seek technical solutions to problems like climate change and food insecurity. By applying pre-determined recipes and strategies, often driven by international trends instead of the contextualized agendas and perspectives of grassroots movements, the view of "development" as the dominant political perspective for Global South societies was reinforced. As such, donor agencies with their own agendas reproduced the asymmetrical relations between Global North and Global South civil societies, following the patterns of colonial geopolitics. Such patterns can also be found within the Global South, as the example of the Brazilian state-owned firm PetroBras financing indigenous organizations or the World

Social Forum shows. In the aid sector this was even more problematic as enormous cash flows moved through the agendas and institutions of the Global North, with little vision of structural change that would enable transformative grassroots social movements and foster their autonomous capacities for the reproduction of life after disaster.

We therefore propose a very critical angle that questions international cooperation from a perspective of emancipatory solidarity or even reciprocity, and distinguishes between development cooperation and political solidarity. Relations framed through development cooperation have to be transformed, overcoming paternalistic relations and perspectives that insist on the necessity of the Global North "helping" the Global South by transferring certain skills, knowledges, and resources. Instead, horizontal and reciprocal alliances between actors and agendas for social change in the North and South should be constructed to promote structural transformation around the world. Within these alliances, grassroots communities and organizations should be the central actors in strategy definition, incorporating where possible local government and universities, instead of international institutions which impose technocratic methods. We recognize that several solidarity organizations are going through such processes of transformation, but this still remains a minority within the sector.

CAMPAIGNS AND NETWORKS

The many international campaigns and networks concerned with concrete cases or issues constitute a second group of solidarity and internationalist actors. Nigerian activists needed Dutch and English counterparts to implement legal strategies against the companies that affected their livelihoods in their home country. The struggles against apartheid or the World Trade Organization allowed the building of long-lasting collaborations, whilst alliances built around global value chains of production (e.g. the Clean Clothes Campaign) or the impact of mining companies (Networks on Vale and Glencore Xstrata) are examples of processes of action that have had positive outcomes.

Here, solidarities have been built between very different people and organizations around shared goals, or people from different parts of the world affected by similar phenomena have been brought together. However, within these processes and networks, the languages and strategic perspectives emanating from the Global North are often still dominant. Also, struggles can be appropriated by bigger, more visible global campaigns whose interests can conflict with the needs of grassroots processes. For example, when global campaigns need a face or story of one person in order to be able to campaign on complex issues and collective processes, this introduces a new logic of individualism, creating tensions and conflicts at the grassroots level.

Within environmentalist networks, struggles have taken place to include the languages and perspectives of the Global South, particularly in relation to indigenous movements

on Nature, knowledges, and spiritualities. For example, the growing leadership of Global South actors, in particular of the group Acción Ecologica from Ecuador, introduced a change of perspective into Friends of the Earth International. Other networks based on South-South cooperation, like Oilwatch, emerged, with strong leadership from Ecuador and Nigeria, to overcome the limitations of Global North leadership. Therefore, the capacity to produce knowledge in an autonomous and independent way as a basis for political action, and to engage in a real dialogue between different kinds of knowledge, is crucial to real solidarity and internationalism.

CONNECTING OUR PRACTICES AND STRUGGLES

Solidarity as part of emancipatory politics requires the revision of our everyday practices in the places where we live. It is obvious that in the face of the civilizational crisis and its ecological expressions, an important reduction in consumption, in the matter we transport across the planet, and in the energy we require, is mandatory. Nevertheless, the social and ecological costs that are inscribed in a certain product that has gone through a global production chain are invisible to the consumer. It is important to acknowledge that our everyday habits, routines, and decisions to a great extent have effects elsewhere in the world – for example the destruction of livelihoods through extractivism.

Consequently, the ethics of social change that obliges us to self-reflect on our practices and to find individual and collective ways to change our reproduction of patterns of domination is a crucial dimension of internationalism today. We need to ask ourselves necessary questions such as: how are we embedded in the imperial way of living? According to what axis of domination are we privileged and where not; what is our point of departure in the struggle? What power patterns do we reproduce in our own lives? What material structures sustain our struggles and forms of knowledge and what can be done about this? Where do we contribute to sustaining global value chains, corporations, and finance? To what extent are we open to learning from other cultures and grammars of emancipation?

In the context of a globalized economy, our struggles are more interdependent than ever before. This means that transformation in the Global South often depends on effective social transformation in the North, and vice versa. To offer a simple example: If there was no demand for the newest generation of technological gadgets, mining in the South would be significantly less lucrative. But also if the expansion of extractivism was not so dramatic in the South, there would be much less migration towards the North, and maybe right-wing populism would have less grounds to expand.

Particularly in the Global North, it has often been easier or more satisfying to support the struggles of distant others in the Global South than to engage with or promote emancipatory struggles back home, partly because these might be full of contradictions and

present difficult choices, whilst helping a distant struggle of the materially "poor" can easily be idealized. This idealization of struggles in the South may have enabled uncritical solidarities. The Venezuelan process could be the best example of this in recent times, as the degeneration of the process described by Edgardo Lander in this book was justified and even reinforced by the unconditional support from outside of the country.

The main problems and challenges for contemporary human society might be embedded in geopolitical and colonial difference, but they are also very much rooted in global interdependency. The extreme concentration of power and wealth in the world, or the consequences of ecological destruction and climate change, are global phenomena rooted in global processes. Therefore, conceptual frameworks like the *imperial mode of living,* transition thinking, and the Degrowth movement might allow us to revise our own role, place, and responsibilities in global processes. In this sense, real solidarity requires an engagement with social transformation in our own societies first, not only to act on the structure of the current world system, but also as a basis to strengthen alliances and solidarity in a horizontal way between struggles around the globe.

SURPRISING SOLIDARITIES: SOUTH-SOUTH, SOUTH-NORTH, TRANSLOCAL AND TRANSLATION

Beyond these more structured and visible forms of solidarity and internationalism, many other forms are taking place in invisible and even unexpected ways. The emergence of simultaneous political phenomena, languages, and cultures need to be explained through the travelling of ideas and strategies through the digital world, personal encounters, travelling, and reading. It was noted how, for example, the ideas of Gandhi still inspire strategies of civil disobedience in many places. In the last few years, the discourses and practices of horizontalism, the questioning of traditional representative democracy, as well as left-wing organizing, have emerged from Senegal to the United States, and from Peru to the Philippines, as our discussion showed. So inter-people learning, sharing, and building often occurs outside the formal frame of institutionalized cooperation or even movements.

Nowadays, solidarities between local processes, without interference from national movements, NGOs, or international institutions are taking place. They configure trans-local solidarities between struggles that recognize themselves in each other. This happened between Cajamarca in Peru and Intag in Ecuador, for example. South-South internationalisms remain hard to sustain and are even logistically complicated by the scarcity of air routes connecting the distant parts of the South. South-North solidarity has also been taking place, such as when Latin American indigenous organizations expressed solidarity with the Standing Rock struggle in the United States, or through the support from the Venezuelan, Brazilian, and Chinese governments for the African-

American movement. Venezuela even opened a diplomatic mission in New Orleans to be in direct contact with African-American social movements.

This diversification of solidarities brings us to issues of translation and learning. In Nabón we talked to the veteran indigenous leader Juana Morocho who plainly refused to talk about development. Possibly, she preferred her life not to be framed in those terms, because her territory and culture go beyond this word, whose very use she might well have considered a form of dispossession. In Ecuador, the construction of the idea of the rights of Nature was originally rejected by the indigenous movement which felt alien to the framework of ordinary justice, but after a process of dialogue and political construction, they decided to accept it as a strategic translation. Of course, there remains a tension between the non-western idea of Nature being endowed with agency and its enshrinement within the Western discourse of rights.

But this is not the same as saying that things get lost in translation. Nor is it the same as saying that translation inevitably implies that something gets lost, as we will never be able to translate our realities in ways that allow complete understanding. In reality, nothing is ever lost in translation, because there is nothing to lose. That is, there are no fixed meanings in separate societies waiting to be lost when they are transported across boundaries. Rather, meanings are created in translation itself. The question is what the politics of that translation process consist of. By the same token, the "complete understanding" of others is not an intelligible goal of dialogue. Understandings are continuously created in encounters, not transmitted from fixed "cultures" or "identities." This underlines the emancipatory importance of paying more careful attention than social movements often do to the slow process through which concrete struggles learn about others and themselves through mutual encounters and mutual translation.

REINVENTING INTERNATIONALISMS

Our revision of the idea of inter-people solidarities allowed for some evident but still necessary critiques. Emancipatory internationalism requires us to overcome the money-centered, donor-driven, technocratic, bureaucratic, and paternalistic logic of aid and cooperation. It also requires us to overcome the trends and formulas embraced by international institutions. Consequently, very relevant political perspectives like *Buen Vivir* or *Plurinational State* are not well known in Africa or Asia, and Latin Americans know little about struggles on those continents, and even less about the emancipatory theories that have emanated from those struggles.

Within processes of exchange and solidarity, inequality also exists. A kind of transnational elite has emerged that attends conferences and monopolizes international dialogue and representation, often without close connections to the struggles back

home. This politics of representation reflects class or status differences within struggles that are not openly discussed. It is also favored by the big agencies of development cooperation promoting "their favorite" leaders, who end up losing a structural connection to the grassroots level.

Uncritical or unconditional solidarity is more harmful than useful, as it reinforces negative (e.g., authoritarian) evolutions within processes, as we have seen in Venezuela or Ecuador. A binary, black and white "cold war" approach (i.e., "the enemy of our enemy is our friend") creates obstacles for transformative processes elsewhere as learning from errors becomes difficult. This confirms the image of the left as hypocritical and authoritarian, leading to a kind of immunity against socialism and any other kind of progressive politics in large parts of the population, as happened in many Eastern European countries.

The reinvention of internationalism and solidarity is taking place in practice, for example through translocal solidarities between territory-based struggles. This reinvention should be understood through notions of internationalism that go beyond simplistic binary understandings of the Global South and Global North as homogeneous and separate entities. The language of intercultural or inter-movement solidarities seems to suggest that these are interactions between two relatively fixed blocs or entities, whilst talking about the local and the global suggests the idea of separated scales. However, the real world is far more complex and interdependent. Many, if not all, phenomena are local and global at the same time, dominations and social struggles are intersected, and the multidimensional social transformation we seek needs at the same time to be personal, collective, symbolic and structural, local and global to be effective.

So solidarity means building our struggles together, in reciprocity, as part of a common struggle. We see solidarity in terms of sharing, caring, and learning between our struggles, instead of giving and receiving. As all our struggles are incomplete, since they all confront some dimensions of the structures of power, all are in need of support wherever they take place; we need to connect them to build more articulated and integrated perspectives and strategies. This also implies that collaboration and cooperation should be built from below through long-term engagements; fighting together means leaving the people engaged in struggles with the power to define their struggle. Finally, we see big challenges for internationalism and solidarity as consequences of the expansive processes of surveillance, securitization, and criminalization that threaten activists in their own contexts and seek to delegitimize and attack solidarity itself.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON STRATEGY

Our journey ends with a final reflection on strategies. We have seen how radical multidimensional transformation is imperative to assure a just and democratic future for humankind. At the same time, the preconditions for such a change are very difficult. Power and resources are concentrated more than ever before in global elites and economic groups, and collective imaginaries of development, consumerism, and individualism are deeply rooted in the subjectivities of the majority of the world population. Militarism, the spread of corporate technology (and technological solutions), and the mass media are enabling factors for these negative conditionalities.

At the same time, we have seen how different logics of struggle and emancipatory politics are occurring throughout the world.

AT THE VERY LEAST, SIX DIFFERENT LOGICS OF STRUGGLE ARE PRESENT:

> prefigurative politics at local levels, in which populations construct or defend self-determination autonomously, such as in Mendha-Lekha or in the process of the Zapatistas in Mexico, but also in many economic initiatives;

> multiple social movements that seek cultural and political change through different strategies, including mobilization, as is the case in feminist, LGTBI, environmentalist, anti-racist, and indigenous movements;

> the appropriation and transformation of some parts of the State through processes of greater communal activity from below, as in the cases of Nabón and Barcelona, where local government enables society to direct itself into more democratic, equitable, and sustainable futures;

> political parties, movements, and instruments that seek to change society through the capturing of the State or participation in the institutional political process, as was found in the cases of Venezuela and Ecuador, as well as in those of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain. In contrast to radical municipalism, these processes tend to focus on the national level, and do not necessarily question the reality of the State. Nevertheless, they can help promote processes of transformative constitutionalism when existing social power relations allow them;

> alter-globalization networks, campaigns, and movements that seek to influence and transform the politics of globalization;

> and lastly, but equally importantly, we have to remember that the private is also political, and that our own personal practices of consumption, of building relationships, and raising children, of relating to each other and to Nature, all matter a great deal. Transformation has to target the cultural dimension of subjectivities shaped by modern capitalist civilization, including desires, habits, and routines.

Of course, in practice, these different strategies can also overlap and connect with one another in many ways. However, they can also contradict one another and conflict with one another, as has been the case between progressive governments and indigenous and feminist movements in Latin America.

Our discussion showed that in spite of differences in our stances towards these different strategies, we agree that the current historical moment implies different temporalities of transformation which are best met by different, eventually complementary political strategies. In the short term, there is the need to stop the accelerated ecological, political, and social processes of destruction and dispossession, through defensive struggles which also protect the conquests of social movements in previous cycles of struggle. Spaces of autonomy, self-organization, and the extension of the commons need to be defended actively, as they are the building stones for deeper change.

Strong social movements of resistance at all levels, local, regional, national, continental, and global, are necessary and such struggles will require a multitude of strategies, including the politics of left-wing political movements or parties which dispute the legal and institutional conditions for transformation within the framework of the State. Different transition initiatives need to be promoted and supported from within and outside of State institutions, and bridges should be built between territorial and practical approaches which prefigure alternative modes of living and approaches that are aimed more at institutional politics. And, in the context of right-wing populism and a conservative offensive, we will also need to defend the liberal languages and institutions of representative democracy, environmentalism, and human rights, as well as the right to dissidence itself. In the face of extended surveillance, securitization, and militarism, solidarity is crucial for the protection of defenders of territories, the environment, and human rights.

This long-term multidimensional transformation will require other, offensive political struggles capable of creating new ways of being and consciousness, new institutions, new modes of production, practices of distribution, and consumption habits. The required political imaginary needs to go far beyond the realities of the Nation-State, the language of human rights, and the current processes and practices of production, consumption, and distribution, to be able to respond fully to the civilizational and ecological crisis we are facing. Such a radically different society is already being born and even practiced historically, in numerous local processes of prefigurative politics. It is bound to specific territories with significant ranges of autonomy from national State institutions, and in some cases, also with emancipatory local government, as in the cases of Nabón in Ecuador and Spanish municipalism.

One important task is to recognize these processes as valuable, to make them visible to each other and connect them. Building popular power through the preservation of the existing commons or by creating new ones, and thereby de-linking communities from the commodifying logic of the globalized capitalist world market, emerges as a path forward for the deepening of democracy and self-determination, as well as for the transformation of relations with Nature, and for the dismantling of patriarchy and decolonization. The political perspectives of plurinationality, polycentricity, *Buen Vivir*, or biodemocracy and their concrete practices allow for the possibility of overcoming the limitations of both modern liberal and Marxist Eurocentric political thought. Throughout our meeting, we saw that this requires deep and significant dialogues between cultures, political traditions, and social movements.

The last cycle of struggles shows that maintaining different logics, scales, and cultures of struggle simultaneously is both very difficult – some would say: impossible – and necessary for radical social change. Without social movements pushing for change in the streets, progressive governments will be coopted by institutional logic and possibly corruption. Radical protest movements that lack processes for building alternatives in terms of (re)production, (re)distribution, and consumption will become reactive or dogmatic. Local rural self-governance and alternative production will not be able to stop ecological destruction without a transformation towards sustainability in urban contexts and without enabling frameworks that have to be created on other scales. And transition initiatives and local alternatives that lack articulation and wider political horizons easily become self-centered, isolated, and marginal.

Several issues mentioned or touched on at our meeting require more discussion. We saw the importance of social control and ownership of technology, but what does good and just use of technology actually mean? Secondly, although we've stated that these contradictions require a politics of multiple temporalities, combining the urgency of radical resistance with the slow pace of deep cultural transformation, remains a big challenge. Finally, the transformation of our methods and networks of production, distribution, and exchange remains a central issue. Of course, several elements of economic transformation are clear; they include the strengthening of local networks of production and consumption, the promotion of circular economies (in which energy and materials are circulated continuously in different ways, to avoid waste), the promotion of sustainable products, and the definancialization of our economies. However, many open questions remain about its articulation on higher levels of our economies: how can this work? What kind of economic and productive models can sustain this?

There will not be one encompassing narrative of change, such as that provided by the narrative of socialism during the late 19th and 20th centuries in many parts of the world. The necessary strategies will differ according to each local and historical context, but the challenge of nurturing relationships between them, of building ecosystems of change composed by different actors, strategies, and scales, is crucial. The kinds of alliances we need are those that connect resistances and alternative-building, on the basis of shared principles that inspire localized practices. For example in India, regarding agriculture, we can see grassroots initiatives working on agro-ecological alternatives while being connected to national movements fighting GMOs.

We need horizontal alignments between local alternatives, and vertical alignments with the national and international level that can help make these struggles successful or sustainable. All of this requires the capacity to reinvent politics as we know it, and to find new ways of working together: between peoples, movements, struggles, and ways of doing politics.

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ROSA-LUXEMBURG-STIFTUNG

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left-wing non-profit organisation providing civic education. It is affiliated with Germany's 'Die Linke' (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide.

The Stiftung works in the context of the growing multiple crises facing our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organisations around the globe, the Stiftung focuses on democratic and social participation, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and alternative economic and social development. The Stiftung's international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions.

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung works towards a more just world and a system based on international solidarity.

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Our world is facing a multidimensional crisis arising from the very civilizational foundations that capitalist modernity is built on: economic growth, instrumental and destructive societal relations with Nature, a blind belief in science and technology and a rational, profit-maximizing, and individualistic understanding of humanity. These bases have not only produced a specific set of problems, including an unprecedented level of ecological destruction. They also shape the possible solutions that are envisioned and often only aggravate the status quo.

Since World War II, the narrative of development has been a very effective instrument in expanding capitalist social and economic relations into the postcolonial world. In the name of development and modernization, a broad variety of other modes of being in the world and understanding it have been labeled as poor, backward, and obsolete. Seeking alternatives beyond development therefore means seeking alternatives beyond this civilization that has led us into this crisis.

This book, which is the result of a group effort, intends to contribute to the urgently needed collective inquiries taking into view new theoretical and political paradigms of social transformation. In six case studies from all over the world and one concluding chapter, it seeks to address simultaneously the complex relations between class, race, coloniality, gender, and Nature, as it is precisely their historical entanglements and interdependencies that configure the civilizational bases of the system we face.